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'User voice': South Devon College

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Brief description

This example shows how highly effective engagement with users supports and promotes improvement at South Devon College.

Overview – the provider's message

'In the past, learners' views were seen as a mechanistic part of the annual survey; not enough use was being made of their feedback. We committed ourselves to a learner involvement strategy, looking at every opportunity to involve learners; collecting their views, informing our decisions, promoting actions and measuring impact. It hasn't been an easy journey, many learners need coaching to express their views - if they can articulate their views, they gain confidence, and can influence and inform. We have become braver in involving learners, ensuring that they are involved and informed about decisions in the college. Many of our recent initiatives can be traced back to views from learners.'



Advice to others? 'Make sure your communication structure is sound and involve users at every opportunity. Ensure that those participating in off-site provision are included. Think about where learners and other users could make an impact. It is worth spending time with learners to help them to articulate their views well. Analyse and communicate the impact of users' views: "you said, we did".'

Pat Denham, Vice Principal

The good practice in detail

South Devon College has had a remarkable journey, from unsatisfactory to outstanding in seven years. At the college's [last inspection](#), inspectors observed that: 'The expectation that learners can and will achieve is prevalent throughout the college's work.' The college has made highly effective and sustained improvements. A key aspect in making these improvements, and continuing to improve, is the good practice in both capturing and using the 'users' voice'. So how has the college managed to successfully engage with learners, parents and carers, employers and staff to support and promote improvement?

Learners' views

A formal 'Learner Involvement Strategy' aims to foster and promote a culture of learner involvement. It says that: 'South Devon College is committed to working in partnership with its learners, engaging and empowering them in shaping their own experience. The college believes that effective, systematic involvement of learners, in reviewing the processes and mechanisms that impact on them, provides a rich source of valuable feedback.'



Learners' views are collected in a number of ways, including: surveys (such as their views about [induction](#)); focus groups; interviews; course representatives; and feedback collected for course reviews and as part of lesson observations. Encouraging learners to voice their views is embedded in the culture of the college with many examples of valuable outcomes such as, setting up a young carers' group and learners promoting an anti-bullying campaign.

A [presentation](#) by learners illustrates how the learner voice is heard at the college. James Reynolds, a student says, 'The student voice is important because it helps to adapt the course to our needs and allows us to get the most benefit from what we do here.'

Learners' views are used effectively by presenting the feedback to relevant staff groups, including senior managers, and by taking appropriate actions. The actions are recorded and monitored by the academic improvement and development board and reported to the college governing body. Laurence Took, the Quality Improvement and Continuing Professional Development Manager says, 'It is important to plan the collection of learner and user views to avoid gaps or duplication. Use a wide range of events, methods and forums to collect views; exploit existing platforms such as course reviews and lesson observations; and, most importantly, act and be seen to act on their views.' Learners' views also provide valuable feedback for the self-assessment process and the subsequent report.

There are well developed arrangements to collect and to analyse learners' views which enable the information to be easily accessible:

- A '[learner views mapping grid](#)' to collect learner views.
- A learner views catalogue, to record what has been done and where the information is held.
- A learner views index which provides key feedback about any issues highlighted by the mapping grid.

An [Ofsted survey](#) identified a range of good practice features in capturing the user voice, including:

- Managers at all levels give a high priority to the views of students in maintaining and building on the college's outstanding provision.
- An open and mutually respectful environment that values student involvement and allows students to voice their opinions to all staff, including the principal.
- An effective range of initiatives that engage and capture the learners' voice that help the college to review, evaluate and improve provision.
- Effective learner-led activities such as organising the annual being healthy event, managing the 'student voice' magazine and the college radio.
- Good student representation in a wide range of college processes and activities, including staff selection panels and the selection of new courses.
- A good range of opportunities for students to become formally involved as student representatives and ambassadors, and for additional involvement in college and community activities.

Parents' views

A 'Parent Involvement Strategy' promotes the involvement of the parents and guardians of younger learners, 'seeking to engage them wherever possible in shaping the learning experience offered by the college'. Parents and carers are invited to contribute to the learner experience by providing feedback at open evenings, parent's evenings and consultation events with staff. The views of parents are collected following each parent review evening and through the college's 'Parent Forums' which are held twice a year.

Employers' views

Employers' views are collected through reviews, surveys and focus groups. Forums are held with employers and 'Sector Focus Groups' for employers are chaired by governors. The governors receive the feedback from the employer focus groups which provide useful information, particularly to develop work-based learning provision. Head of Business Advantage, Adele Dawson says: 'It's about employers knowing that we take their views seriously, responding to their views and communicating the results.'



Staff views

The college recognises the importance of providing opportunities for staff to provide their views and feedback. They are collected using internal service reviews, and via the 'staff ideas' page on the intranet, which has been set up to capture innovative ideas and suggestions from staff.

Provider background

[South Devon College](#) is a general further education college serving Torquay, Paignton and Brixham, collectively known as Torbay, and the rural areas of South Devon. The main campus is situated in Paignton. Three major adult and community learning centres located in

Brixham, Paignton and Torquay are run in partnership with community colleges. The college offers courses, including pre-entry courses, in all sector subject areas. Higher education provision has been developed in partnership with the University of Plymouth and a new University Centre has recently been opened at the College. The college also offers work-based learning programmes and is a centre of vocational excellence for construction trades.



Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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