

Executive Summary

Learning to Listen, Listening to Learn

The Project

For the lifetime of SRB6, the Learners' Forum was tasked to gather feedback from residents of Hull regarding learning, and to feed this information to providers and funders of learning so that the views of learners were considered whilst learning was being planned and delivered.

In the pilot year of the project, the aim was to talk to residents in Hull about learning in general, and their experiences of it, in order to gain an insight into issues that prevented them from, or enabled them to, participate in learning, and to look at their motivations for learning.

There has been previous research in Hull that has looked into these issues. However, it has tended to be quantitative, and so the idea here was to look at the issues qualitatively, in more depth, and therefore begin to get more detail about the possible reasons behind the statistics about involvement and achievement in Hull.

The methods used were mainly individual interviews, followed by focus groups to explore issues arising from the interviews. Individual interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour, and focus groups of up to 10 people lasted an hour. Overall, the project spoke to 148 residents of Hull. These were individuals from across the city, and a third of the sample was from the SRB6 Community Target Areas (CTAs).

A mass of mainly qualitative data was gained and analysed, and the main findings are laid out below.

A Learning Culture? What Hull residents think about learning

People were asked whether they thought learning was worthwhile. The vast majority (93%) thought that learning was worthwhile, and nobody said that learning wasn't worthwhile at all. A small number (4%) expressed reservations about learning as they were afraid of becoming overqualified for available jobs.

People were also asked why they thought learning was worthwhile. The main reason related to employment, with learning being seen as a way to a job, a better job, or just to increase skills generally in the workplace. Others saw learning as worthwhile as it provided skills that were useful in everyday life. A third group stressed the importance of learning as it kept them thinking, and exercised their minds.

Most people wanted to do some learning in the future. The majority (59%) indicated a specific course or subject they wanted to do, and a further 23% wanted to do some learning, but did not have a clear idea of what. Overall, then 72% of respondents expressed a desire to do more learning in the future.

A small number (10%) didn't want to do any more learning in the future. There was no clear trend across the group in terms of their reason why, however, this entire group was either retired or unemployed. A further 8% said they would possibly do some learning in the future depending on if they felt they needed it.

These results show that people see learning as worthwhile and want to participate in learning in the future. A 'learning culture' is far more complicated than these two issues, but these issues do indicate positive attitudes to learning in Hull.

Why participate in learning?

There were two main strands of motivation to learning, relating to employment and non-employment reasons. The most popular of these two strands were employment related motivations, with 45% of those who had engaged in learning since school being motivated by employment related reasons.

A smaller number (28%) had been motivated by reasons not relating to employment. These motivations included interest in the subject, social reasons, children, volunteering, personal development and using learning as a catalyst to move on in life. These motivations were often not mutually exclusive, and a further 18% were motivated by reasons from both categories. Often they were doing learning to get a job, but the job they sought also related to their interest or hobby.

Also the research showed that there were often 'trigger' events that either released individuals to participate in learning, or encouraged them to actually do it. The most important of these related to life-changes. For example, redundancy could spur people into action so they were better qualified to get a job. Also children growing up, and needing less care often released parents to get involved in learning.

Barriers and Enablers to Learning

There were several issues raised that constituted barriers or enablers to learning for people. These issues were; the learning available in the city; availability and form of information; the costs involved in participating in learning; the time needed to do learning; people's past experiences and feelings about themselves and learning; tutors and style of teaching; the other learners on a course; family issues; and, location of courses.

People felt that there were key barriers that needed to be dealt with; that these were the ones most likely to stop them learning in the near future, and therefore the ones that, if dealt with, would be most effective in enabling them to participate in learning. These were information, finance and time. People said information was hard to find and didn't always tell them what they needed to know. They also cited costs of course fees and other costs as reasons they couldn't participate in learning. Finally, they said that it was hard to find time to commit to learning in the midst of busy lives, and this was made easier with

time off from work and employer support, as well as flexibility in course programs.

Emerging Themes and Recommendations

Some themes emerged across the data, and have led to recommendations for action or further investigation:

Learning is becoming more important for people- for leisure and employment. It has also become a commodity, and is thus beginning to be viewed in that way by learners. Therefore they expect it to be as responsive to their needs as any other service that they use.

Recommendation- That demand-led provision be developed as far as is practical at both the macro level through the local LSC, and the micro level through tutors and providers running individual courses flexibly.

Employment was an important motivator to learn. People were aware that learning could help them get a job, or a better job, and that those who were better qualified tended to be in better paid jobs. However, it was not clear how effectively people could negotiate the path through learning into work or a better job, as they seemed to oversimplify the process and relationship between learning and work.

Recommendation- That the ways people negotiate their way through learning into work be investigated further to determine how effective their strategies are, and how they can be facilitated to do this better.

Certain events, or sequences of events either release people or encourage them to participate in learning. Knowing more about these patterns may provide opportunities for targeting marketing and information about learning more effectively.

Recommendation- That there is further investigation into patterns of 'trigger' events into learning, and that if appropriate, this information is used to target information more effectively to widen participation.

The first experience of learning after a break, or since school, is often critical in determining future learning paths. A good experience here will lead to more learning, and a bad one will make people less like to engage again. People do not always choose beginner's courses at this stage.

Recommendation- That tutors and providers should be aware of learner- returners on their courses, and ensure far as possible that they have a good experience.

Some people saw learning as a means to an end, such as a qualification. Others saw the learning experience as the end in itself, for example if their aim was to meet people and have fun. This affected what they wanted out of the course, and how they wanted it to be run. These different motivations cut across those studying different subjects at different levels.

Recommendation- That through effective initial assessment, tutors and providers are aware of the motivations of learners, and where possible seek to meet their needs.

Taster courses were praised, especially by those who had been out of learning for a long time, and/or were not very confident.

Recommendation- That there should be more locally run taster courses and short courses across the city.

Cost was an important barrier to learning, especially those on a low wage who weren't eligible for free courses.

Recommendation- That there should be a bursary scheme, or learning fund, to assist those who can't afford the costs of learning, especially those low waged individuals.

Basic IT courses in the city were very popular, and people felt they provided important skills for employment and leisure. However, the way these courses were provided was frequently criticised, and this dissatisfaction with courses had adversely affected people's learning.

Recommendation- That further investigation is carried out into what people think of current IT provision, to determine how it could be improved from a learner perspective.

Online learning is potentially a solution to issues of time, flexibility and, to a degree, cost. Not many people had experience of it. However, bearing in mind people's problems with the IT courses, further work may be needed to determine how it would work most effectively in Hull.

Recommendation- That work is carried out looking at how online learning in Hull is working, and how it could work most effectively for learners in Hull.

Information, and people's problems with it, was a key finding of the research, and its importance as a barrier cannot be overestimated.

Recommendation- That information is seen as the key factor upon which the success of any other solutions rest.

Recommendation- That there is a publicity drive to let people know about those services that can give them information and advice about learning.