

WIDER BENEFITS OF LEARNING RESEARCH REPORT NO.1

*The Wider
Benefits of
Further Education:
Practitioner Views*

John Preston & Cathie Hammond

Centre for Research
on the Wider
Benefits of Learning



THE WIDER BENEFITS OF FURTHER EDUCATION: PRACTITIONER VIEWS

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Executive summary

This report is the result of a collaborative project between the DfES Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) about practitioner views on the wider benefits of Further Education (FE). A questionnaire was circulated in early 2001 to over 10,000 practitioners throughout England in a representative sample of FE Colleges.

What are perceived to be the wider benefits of FE?

- **Esteem and efficacy** are considered to be the most important benefits of FE. Quantitative analyses reveal that esteem and efficacy are perceived as separate benefits of FE, and our qualitative findings suggest that esteem and efficacy bring about different classes of wider benefits. For example, esteem may lead to improved psychological health, whereas efficacy often leads to an increased propensity to participate in the community.
- **Independence of thought, problem solving, and improved IT skills** are identified as outcomes of FE. These contribute to both economic and non-economic areas of life, illustrating that there are inter-connections between economic and non-economic outcomes of learning.
- **Social integration.** FE appears to be effective in developing social networks and in bridging differences between ethnic groups and individuals of different ages. This promotes tolerance and active citizenship.
- **The College is a community resource**, encouraging social and cultural development and ‘community esteem’. Benefits are not only realised at the level of the individual.

What aspects of FE do practitioners think are relevant to wider benefits?

- **Subject area:** Humanities practitioners stress the benefits of their subjects in terms of community and political engagement through developing students’ awareness of their place in society. Health practitioners stress benefits of their subject across all domains.

- **Level:** The students who are reported to experience benefits most in terms of esteem and efficacy are those studying on access and basic skills courses.
- **Student groups:** Students who have experienced failure within the education system previously, often described by practitioners as ‘second chancers’ benefit particularly in terms of esteem and efficacy. Ethnic minority students are perceived to benefit more than other student groups in terms of increased efficacy, esteem and labour market outcomes. For overseas students, learning English is seen as a key element in community integration.
- **Teaching style:** Interactions between students are thought to be central in the formation of tolerant attitudes and active citizenship. All wider benefits are fostered in a learning environment that is supportive and responsive. Reported barriers to the generation of wider benefits include the rigidity of the curriculum, time and funding pressures, bureaucratic burdens and staff morale.
- **College type:** We found no differences in the wider benefits reported by practitioners working in Sixth Forms and general FE Colleges.
- **Practitioner experience:** Practitioners who had been working in the sector for longer were less likely to report wider benefits than practitioners who had spent less time working in FE.

Recommendations

- **Further research** is needed to investigate students’ views on the wider benefits of their courses, and to examine the roles of FE colleges in community development.
- **Curricula** that are seen to be particularly effective in generating wider benefits such as health, humanities, access, and basic skills courses should be promoted within the sector.
- **Diversity and integration.** The existing diversity of the FE sector in terms of course variety and student composition has great potential to deliver wider benefits. Diversity should not preclude integration of students, which is also important in generating wider benefits, particularly tolerance.
- **Colleges are a critical ‘hub’** of civic, cultural and political activity in the locality. The College as physical locale is important, not just as a ‘brand’ for the provision of distance learning or locally franchised courses. It should be preserved.

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Foreword

This report is the result of collaboration between the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre and the Learning and Skills Development Agency. The research looked at how teachers in Further Education Colleges perceive the wider benefits of learning. We are very pleased to be able jointly to publish the findings, and think that they add to the knowledge and insights being gained from the range of projects the Centre is conducting.

The research has several useful messages which can lead to further work – especially those which were not intuitively obvious. For example, the research suggests that less experienced teachers have a more optimistic view of the wider benefits of learning. Views also vary across different curriculum areas with health, humanities, support subjects and access subjects most often seen as supplying wider benefits.

The implications of the findings are important. We have learned from this work that teachers believe integration to be important, as well as diversity. Colleges are important as *centres of activity* in learning which nurtures wider benefits – outreach approaches are just part of the picture. They are institutions which are valued in communities as key resource centres for enhancing the quality of local life. More flexible curricula are needed to support a rich learning environment that will draw in the widest range of learners. Tutors also need to consider in their teaching the wider benefits that the curriculum can bring.

This work has thrown up important questions which merit further investigation. If the wider benefits, such as confidence building or growing self-esteem are not experienced, is it even possible successfully to deliver the more instrumental ones, such as exam passes and jobs? Where do the boundaries lie between instrumental and wider benefits? How do learners themselves view the same issues?

Such themes are central to the longer-term research programme in which the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre is engaged. Learning and life course adaptation and learning and social cohesion are central themes. Recent work has explored the

learner perspective through the experiences people have. This has revealed, among many other things, the significance of the ‘good teacher’ as a critical influence in motivating lifelong learning. Positive experience of doing courses also underpins the personal development and community oriented benefits which many learners report.

The study of tutor perceptions therefore adds an important dimension to this work. It also raises comparable methodological questions which merit further investigation. How can you reap the insights from teachers’ knowledge, while taking account of their subjectivity? Should these findings be related to those from in-depth interviews with potential and actual students?

The LSDA – or the Learning and Skills Research Centre – might consider taking up some of these further research points. We would hope to continue the research partnership on this vital issue of the wider benefits of learning and their recognition and assessment. In the meantime, we believe the report merits widespread discussion throughout the sector. How important are, or should be, the wider benefits of the curriculum in the planning and delivery of courses?

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We are very grateful to Graham Knight of the LSDA for his invaluable role in producing and distributing the survey and collating the data. Thanks also to Andrew Morris of the LSDA for co-ordinating the survey.

John Preston and Cathie Hammond are Research Officers in the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning.

1. Introduction

Further Education (FE) has been referred to as the ‘Cinderella’ sector of education (Baker, 1989), but its expected disappearance has been held up by an extended period of unprecedented expansion. From an adult education tradition of broadening political awareness, imparting ‘useful knowledge’ and popular and activism in the early 1900s, FE has been largely defined in terms of narrow vocationalism throughout much of the twentieth century (Green and Lucas, 1999: 17-20). However, the view that FE exists largely to serve industry obscures the kaleidoscopic nature of the sector – the diversity of courses, student, and lecturer experiences. In recent policy documents, there has been acknowledgement that post-compulsory education has important and significant non-economic benefits (DfES, 1999: 13). In this report, we examine to what extent these perceptions are based on evidence from practitioners – how far the sector can be said to deliver on the wider benefits of learning.

There has been no large scale systematic investigation of whether the anecdotal wider benefits of FE or those expected by policy makers are observed by practitioners involved in teaching students or running courses. In some ways, practitioners are the best source of knowledge that we have on wider benefits. Their accumulated experience and insight, involving a variety of students over a number of years, may tell us more about the benefits of learning than individual student accounts. Indeed, practitioners may be in a privileged position to observe students benefiting in ways that the students themselves are unaware of, such as increased confidence.

In collaboration with the LSDA, we have carried out the first survey to examine practitioner views of the wider benefits of learning. This report summarises the results. Firstly, in section 2 we describe the methodology. In section 3, the results from the quantitative data are discussed. We then examine results from the qualitative data, which turned out to be a rich source of information concerning both mechanisms and effects of learning (section 4). Finally, we report our conclusions and make some tentative recommendations (section 5). Appendices 1 and 2 provide more detailed technical information concerning statistical modelling. A copy of the questionnaire used in the survey is provided in appendix 3.

2. Methodology

In order to ascertain views from a wide variety of practitioners, a survey method of data collection was employed. The intention of the survey was not only to elicit practitioner attitudes concerning the Wider Benefits of Learning, but also to ascertain whether views varied according to variables such as subject taught, College type and time served in the sector. A further purpose was to ask practitioners to consider which aspects of their practice would be most conducive in the production of wider benefits. After designing an initial version of the questionnaire, piloting of the instrument was conducted with two focus groups in an FE and Sixth Form College. This resulted in the questionnaire being redesigned to omit questions on aspects such as crime where the practitioners stated that they would have little insight into student behaviour. The instrument used is provided in appendix 3.

The intention of questions 1 to 9 (Section A) was to identify key demographic information about the respondent and their students. Questions focused upon the main subject which practitioners taught so as to provide the context for responses to questions concerning wider benefits. Question 1 asked the respondent to identify the main programme area of subject taught. These subject categories were identical to those used by the former Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) in their classification of subject and most practitioners would be expected to be familiar with these subject groupings. Questions 2 to 5 elicited information concerning the age of the main group of students taught, their level of study, main qualification taught and student ethnicity. The remainder of questions in this section asked about the respondent's main work role, gender, working status and time served in the FE sector.

Section B of the survey asked respondents to express their opinions on a five point scale running from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) about the wider benefits of learning to their students. The questions concerned whether their main group of students taught (identified in questions 1-5) had benefited from their learning. The items chosen arose from an extensive review of the literature at the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning (Schuller et al., 2001). Items included those related to health, esteem, civic participation and values. In addition to questions concerning

individual wider benefits, practitioners were asked to record the key mechanisms whereby learning may have impacted on these benefits (question 11). Question 12 allowed open-ended responses concerning the benefits of learning for the local community, benefits for particular types of student, and any other comments concerning the wider benefits of learning.

In co-operation with the LSDA, we compiled a purposive sample of colleges designed to reflect the diversity of the sector in terms of location in the country, and College type in terms of the division between FE and Sixth Form colleges. Thirty five colleges across the country were chosen to participate, with approximately 10,000 estimated lecturers and managers employed in total. It was decided not to survey specialist institutions, although two prison education units, attached to FE colleges, were included in the sample. Colleges were responsible for the collection and administration of surveys, but perhaps due to the existing burden on practitioners' time, only 2,729 questionnaires were returned giving an approximate response rate of 27%.

Given this response rate, we must ask how representative our sample is when compared to the composition of employment in the sector as a whole, and how this would affect our results. Ultimately, we will never know whether the individuals who did not respond were more, or less, likely to agree with the items in the questionnaire. However, by comparing the characteristics of the population with the sample, we may be able to detect areas of possible bias. Table 1 (below) compares employment in the sector by Full / Part time, gender and College type with the characteristics of our own data.

As can be seen in table 1, although gender is accurately reflected in our sample, there is an over-representation of full-time employees and, to a lesser extent, those in Sixth Form colleges. This may be due to the difficulties involved in distributing and collecting questionnaires from part-timers in FE colleges, which are often larger than Sixth Form colleges. Although our subsequent analysis shows that College type is not related to response, part-timers were found to be significantly more likely to cite benefits in terms of efficacy, values and political engagement. This should be borne in mind when interpreting the subsequent results, which may understate the

population's agreement with these items. However, in terms of gender, the sample was representative of the population as a whole. In addition, we may also consider that the over-representation of full-timers in the sample was positive, given their relatively greater contact with students.

Table 1: Sample and population characteristics compared

	FE employment 2000 (Source: FEFC)	Sample
Male	42%	42%
Female	58%	58%
Full time	41%	66%
Part time	59%	34%
Sixth Form College	7.6%	12.6%
Other College	92.4%	87.4%

3. Quantitative results

3.1 What are considered to be the most important benefits of FE?

Table 2 (below) provides the mean and 95% confidence intervals for each of the response items concerned with the perceived benefits of FE. The table also includes the percentage of respondents who agreed or agreed strongly with each of the statements. Response rates for these items varied between 94.8% (rights and responsibilities) to 99.4% (improved self esteem). Means are shown for each question with a 95% confidence interval indicating that, for most questions we are almost certain that respondents had a different response from neither agreeing or disagreeing that there was a benefit (a score of 3). Items are ranked in terms of the mean level of agreement (or disagreement) with each statement.

Table 2: Ranked mean scores for perceived benefits

I believe that through their learning my students, on the whole...

Item	Mean	% agree or strongly agree	95% confidence interval for mean	
Experience improved self esteem (esteem)	4.22	92.5	4.20	4.25
Form wider social networks (social)	3.98	80.2	3.95	4.01
Have more control over their lives (control)	3.88	76.9	3.85	3.91
Are more able to manage change in their lives (manage)	3.85	74.1	3.82	3.87
Have increased awareness of their rights and responsibilities (rights)	3.65	62.9	3.61	3.68
Are more likely to be tolerant of other ethnic groups (tolera)	3.63	60.7	3.60	3.67
Experience psychological health benefits (psych)	3.48	47.3	3.44	3.50
Have a heightened sense of moral responsibility (moral)	3.45	51.4	3.41	3.48
Are more likely to take care of their environment (enviro)	3.37	44.6	3.34	3.41
Are more likely to participate in community activity (comm)	3.33	41.8	3.30	3.37
Are more likely to trust others (trust)	3.31	39.5	3.28	3.34
Are more likely to vote (vote)	3.05	23.7	3.01	3.08
Have increased interest in the political system (polint)	2.92	23.5	2.88	2.95
Experience physical health benefits (phys)	2.91	20.2	2.88	2.95
Are more likely to reflect on spiritual matters (spirit)	2.88	18.3	2.84	2.91

As can be seen from the table, FE practitioners are most likely to agree that students benefit in terms of improved self esteem, development of social networks, and in the control and management of their lives. Lecturers also perceive that students benefit through being more aware of their rights and responsibilities and tolerance of other ethnic groups. These key perceived benefits of FE are related to notions of identity capital and social capital. Learning is thought to increase the self-esteem of learners and enables them to orientate and plan their future destinies with some element of internal control – elements of identity capital (Cote 1997: 578). Learning also influences relations with others by expanding social networks and encouraging tolerance – elements of social capital (Putnam, 1996: 56). However, the trust dimension of social capital is not rated so highly by practitioners as a benefit of College learning.

At the other end of the spectrum, there was disagreement that students were benefiting in terms of reflection on spiritual matters, physical health benefits, and interest in the political system. These could be seen to be dis-benefits of FE, with learning discouraging spirituality, exercise and engagement with political concerns. Alternatively, practitioners may be indicating that FE has no place in developing these attributes in students. To some extent, this is understandable as such benefits may be related to study of specific subjects such as religious education. For example, in health and community care there was most agreement that students were physically healthier, the mean score being 3.44, compared to a mean of 2.91 for the population as a whole. As we shall see later, curriculum area was an important area relating practitioner attitudes to benefits.

3.2 How do perceived benefits group together?

Appendix 1 describes how Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) techniques were employed in order to produce a ‘mental map’ of perceived benefits in terms of underlying factors. In summary, there were found to be five main factors around which question items were grouped:-

1. Self-efficacy, which includes items on control of one’s life and the management of change.
2. Mental health, which includes items on self-esteem and psychological health.
3. Community, which includes items on social networks and community involvement.
4. Values, which includes items on morality, tolerance and the environment.
5. Political involvement, which includes items on voting and political interest.

Four items, those relating to physical health, spirituality, trust and knowledge of rights and responsibilities did not load well onto any of the above factors. In order to keep the analysis straightforward and easy to interpret, we excluded these items in further analysis.

In order to analyse how various characteristics influenced practitioner perceptions we formed scales for each of the five factors, each scale being the mean practitioner score for the items comprising the factor. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis was undertaken for each of the five factors as dependent variables with independent variables representing a mixture of staff and student characteristics. This enables us to assess the effect of each of a number of different tutor characteristics on each of the factors, while holding constant the effects of all the other characteristics in the analysis. Full results from these regressions are provided in appendix 2, and have been summarized in the text. In the analysis below we provide ‘unstandardised regression coefficients’ and compare these with the coefficient for a baseline characteristic, which is by definition zero. For example, in figure 1, teaching a health subject has a positive effect of +.197 on efficacy when compared to physical science (the baseline category). This means that health practitioners rank efficacy benefits more highly than physical science practitioners.

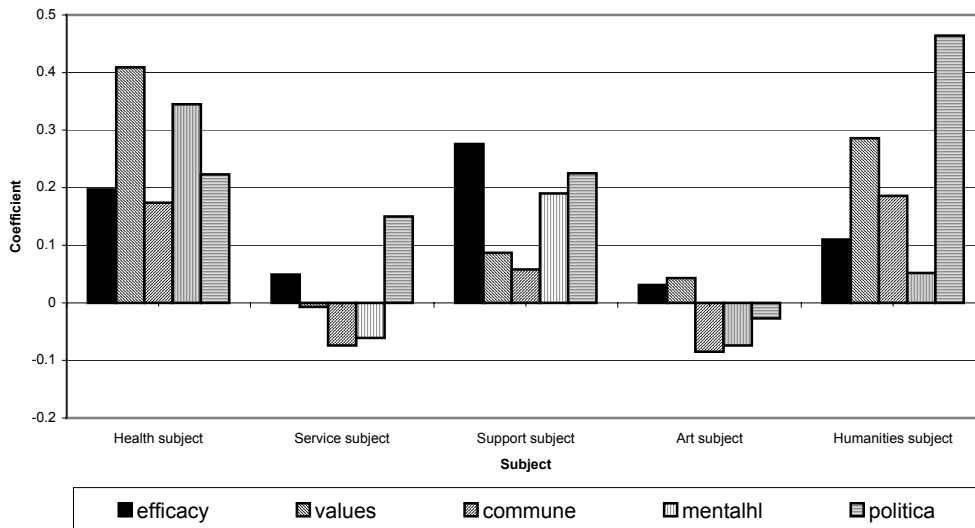
3.3 Do perceived benefits differ by subject, qualification aim and level?

In order to ascertain whether benefits varied by subject, it was helpful to form groups of similar disciplines. Six subject groups were formed: the physical sciences including science, agriculture and construction; service-vocational including business and hotel management; support services including basic skills and learning support; health; humanities; and art. The last three subjects were kept as discrete categories as they did not appear to form natural groupings with other subject areas. Physical science was defined as the ‘baseline’ category (regression coefficient zero) and the regression coefficients for each of the five other subject areas were estimated and compared with it.

Figure 1 (below) shows the results by subject grouping for the five factors. Unstandardised regression coefficients are given for each subject. Physical science is the baseline subject in our analysis. Although the size of the unstandardised coefficient gives some idea as to the strength of the effect of each characteristic on the

factor score, appendix 2 provides details about the statistical significance of the coefficients.

Figure 1: Unstandardised regression coefficients by subject



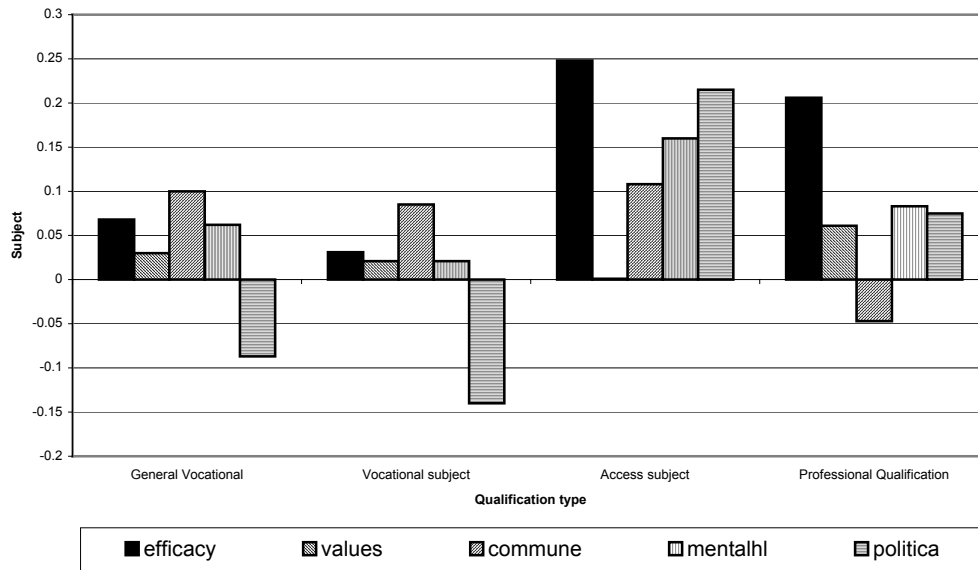
As shown in figure 1, health and humanities tutors expressed strong agreement with perceptions of the wider benefits gained by their students represented by the factors when compared with physical science practitioners. These tendencies could reflect curriculum content. In the case of health subjects, curricula include a wide variety of topics including mental health, ethical considerations and working with others. Many humanities subjects such as politics, economics and sociology include reference to political and community participation. However, there may also be pedagogical differences in terms of a more discursive or exploratory approach in these subject areas when compared to others. We must also be aware that the differences could be related to the characteristics of practitioners or their experiences with students in certain subject areas, and not necessarily to the course characteristics. For example, a lecturer or student of construction may have different expectations concerning the potential of their subject for individual and societal change than a sociology lecturer. Those involved in support services were significantly more likely to cite efficacy and mental health benefits of their programmes. Practitioners may expect their students to experience increased resilience as a result of support programmes.

For largely vocational subjects such as those preparing students for work in the service sector, practitioners were not as positive regarding the perceived benefits for students. Interestingly though, there was a belief that students would be significantly more likely to benefit in the field of political interest. This may be due to the economic and political content of these courses (see page 29), and to the effects of better employment prospects upon students' self-efficacy within the economic and political sphere. Pedagogical orientation towards group learning and working may also contribute. General negativity regarding other perceived benefits may be due to the emphasis of practitioners on the labour market outcomes of their subjects. Physical science practitioners – the 'baseline' in our analysis – were relatively unlikely to rank wider benefits as outcomes of their courses.

Within curriculum areas, the qualification type which practitioners deliver differs across the sector. For example, practitioners delivering Business qualifications may be teaching mainly on A level programmes, General National Vocational Qualifications, National Vocational Qualifications or a range of professional and training courses. There will also be differences in the level of qualification which practitioners are mainly involved with - from entry to postgraduate level. Figures 2 and 3 (below) illustrate differences in practitioner attitudes by type and level of subject delivered.

Figure 2 (below) shows unstandardised regression coefficients by qualification type, using general academic subjects (such as A level and GCSE) as the baseline category. Significantly, practitioners on access courses and those leading to professional qualifications are most likely to judge their courses as leading to efficacy benefits. This confirms perspectives that these courses are useful in terms of life and career management. Indeed, personal and career planning is often an integral part of such programmes. In addition, practitioners in access subjects believe that individuals benefit in terms of mental health and are more likely to be politically involved when compared to the baseline qualification (see page 29). Again, this may reflect practitioner perspectives regarding the palliative and emancipatory potential of these courses for returners.

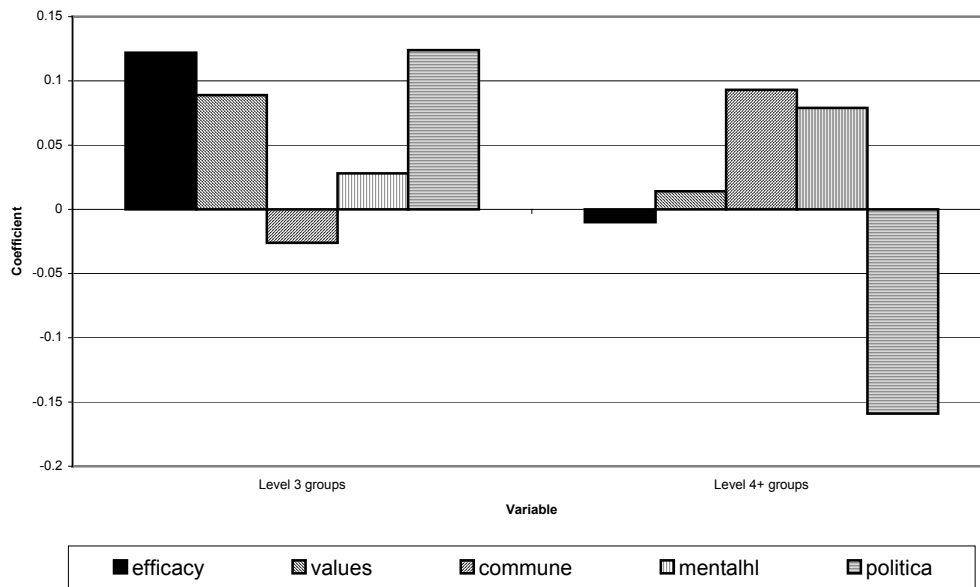
Figure 2: Unstandardised regression coefficients by qualification type



Interestingly, most practitioners felt strongly that purely vocational courses did not have an effect upon political participation compared to the baseline category. Although this may reflect the perceived class composition of students on these courses in terms of their perceived propensity to engage, practitioners may also be aware of the curricular implications of following a purely vocational route on active citizenship. However, a more encouraging result from practitioners teaching mainly General Vocational Courses was that students were significantly more likely to participate in their communities. Pedagogical orientations towards group learning and placements in the voluntary or community setting may be responsible for this result.

In terms of qualification level, an analysis was undertaken of perceived benefits for those following level 3 and level 4 qualifications compared to those following lower level courses. Figure 3 illustrates this result.

Figure 3: Unstandardised regression coefficients by qualification level



In areas of efficacy, values and politics, students following level 3 courses are perceived to be significantly more likely to benefit compared to the baseline category of students on lower level courses. Practitioners therefore believe that students doing level 3 courses gain through the formation of internal and external efficacy, as well as the development of liberal values. For level 4 courses, the only result of significance was that students were less likely to benefit in terms of political engagement. Presumably, by this level of study, tutors believe that students have already formed political views and behaviours and are engaging politically, although this result is contrary to other findings regarding the benefit of level 4 qualifications on engagement (Bynner and Egerton, 2001: 38-41). The sample used by Bynner and Egerton included students with level 4 qualifications gained in all types of higher education (HE) institutions. Consequently, a possible explanation for the contradiction in findings is that level 4 qualifications gained in FE / HE institutions are less likely to yield benefits than level 4 qualifications gained elsewhere.

3.4 Do benefits differ by student ethnicity, age and college characteristics?

An unexpected finding of the research was that, aside from subject, qualification aim and qualification level, there were no significant differences in results when student ethnicity and type of College were taken into account. That is, practitioners who taught classes where over 20% of the students were from an ethnic minority did not report significantly different benefits to those who didn't. Perhaps more surprisingly, there were no significant differences in benefits reported by those in general FE and Sixth Form colleges.

In terms of ethnicity, this may mean that there are no particular additional perceived benefits for ethnic minority groups compared to other students. This challenges ideas that ethnic minority students may be particular beneficiaries of FE, at least in terms of practitioner perceptions of received benefits. Further unpacking of this response is necessary in order to clarify matters. It could be, for example, that to identify ethnic minority groups (or ethnic majority – white groups) as a homogeneous category is unhelpful in terms of isolating specific benefits. For example, analysis of the qualitative data suggests that non-British ethnic minority students are particularly likely to experience wider benefits from courses in English as an additional language (page 35).

Although differences in student ethnicity made no difference to perceived benefits, practitioners who taught mainly the over 19 age group identified benefits in terms of values, but were less likely to identify benefits in terms of community participation and mental health than those teaching 16-19 year olds, and these differences were statistically significant. Perhaps practitioners believe that adult learners' participation in the community and their mental health propensities are not as malleable as those of 16-19 year olds (see page 33), although it is interesting that practitioners are more likely to believe that the values of adult learners may shift as a result of their educational experience.

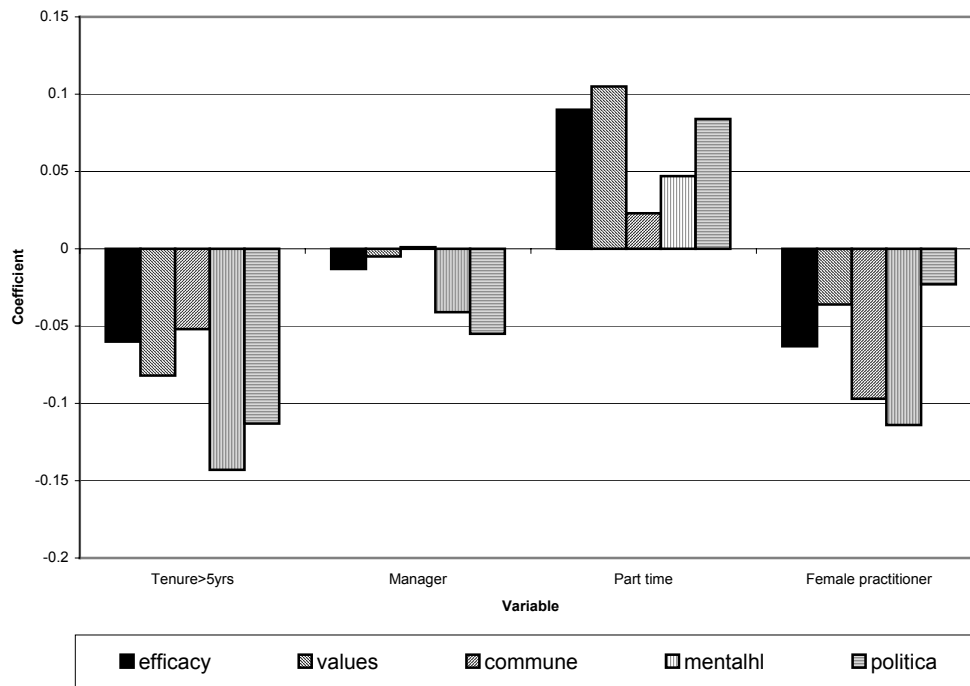
That no significant differences between the views of practitioners in general FE and Sixth Form colleges were identified was a more surprising result given that much has been made of the pastoral curriculum and extra-curricular activities in the latter sector. A lack of difference in results could be connected with the drift of Sixth Form colleges towards being more general FE providers. However, given that significant differences in answers were found between practitioners in different subject and qualification areas, it may be that the real differences in overall perceptions of the value of Sixth Form colleges are driven by curricular, rather than institutional differences.

3.5 Do perceived benefits differ by practitioner characteristics?

There may be some grounds for assuming that personal characteristics of practitioners have an effect upon their perceptions of the wider benefits of learning. Personal background, position and experience may structure the ways in which benefits are perceived. Although whether the respondent was a lecturer or manager made no significant difference to perceptions of benefits, gender and experience within the sector did.

As can be seen in figure 4 (below) practitioners with more than five years' experience in the FE sector were less likely than practitioners with fewer years' experience to state that students benefit from their courses, and the difference in likelihood was statistically significant in relation to mental health. Another statistically significant difference was between the perceptions of part and full-timers, part-timers being more likely than full-timers to state that students benefit in terms of efficacy, value change and political engagement. The tenure and part-time effects, when analysed together could imply that with more exposure to students, practitioners become more aware that students are not benefiting in the ways in which they may have been initially expected to. This is an interesting result as it challenges assumptions that evidence for wider benefits accumulates with practitioner experience. Instead, practitioners may become more aware of the limitations of learning in delivering benefits, given structural constraints of student class, gender and ethnicity.

Figure 4: Unstandardised regression coefficients for practitioner characteristics



There are no significant differences between the ways in which managers (employees whose principal activity is managing) and other practitioners perceive the benefits of learning. Although managers’ engagement with students and lecturers differs substantially across the sector, the consistency of views with lecturers implies that managers may have more than limited experience of student experiences and outcomes. Despite downsizing and restructuring of colleges, a large proportion of managers in FE will have been promoted from the ranks of lecturer and retain some classroom experience.

In terms of gender, women were less likely to agree that students benefit in terms of community participation or mental health when compared to male practitioners, this finding being statistically significant. The reasons for this difference are not immediately obvious, especially as we have already controlled for holding a management position, part time employment and course type delivered, all of which are likely to be gendered. Like the issue of student ethnicity, this question needs further investigation, although differences in practitioner experience of working life in colleges may provide one reason for these differences in perception. For example,

female teachers may be cautious as to the community participation benefits of learning, given the nature of family and work life.

3.6 What leads to wider benefits?

Aside from the nature of wider benefits, practitioners were asked to reflect on aspects of the student's experience which might be expected to best deliver non-economic benefits. Obviously, this is rather a general question, although it provides some insight into possible transmission mechanisms for benefits. Practitioners could choose as many answers as they wished from nine reasons as to which aspect of their course is the most beneficial. Nearly all respondents (99.3%) ticked more than one box, the median number of responses was 5. Table 3 (below) summarises the results:-

Table 3: What is the most beneficial aspect of your course?

Aspect	% agreement
Interaction between students	85%
Course content	81%
Responsibility for own learning	79%
Sense of purpose	66%
Teaching style	62%
Learning environment	50%
Structuring of student time	46%
Extra-curricular activities	27%
Other	6%

As shown in table 3, the most widely cited benefit of practitioners courses was interaction between students (85%), with course content (81%) and responsibility for one's own learning also seen as important (79%). Process, then, is seen to be as important as content, although this does not mean that process *without* content is likely to deliver benefits. The 'mechanics' of student experience: the learning environment (50%) and structuring of students time (46%) were seen as less important than teaching style (62%) and a sense of purpose (66%). This seems to

suggest that process, content and what happens in the classroom in terms of purpose and teaching style are more important for practitioners in delivering wider benefits than where lessons are taught, or how time is structured. Certainly, activities outside of the classroom were not ranked as a source of wider benefits, with only 27% of the sample agreeing that extra-curricular activities contributed to the formation of wider benefits. 6% of respondents cited some other beneficial aspect of their course – these responses are analysed in the next section alongside the other qualitative responses.

4. Analysis of qualitative data

4.1 Introduction

As mentioned on page 7, the questionnaire included several open-ended questions. Responses to these questions were analysed through a grounded theory approach, although conceptual categories of wider benefits were also employed as ascertained from the review of literature in Schuller et al (2001). Because answers often related to more than one question, the data were pooled and analysed together. Just over a quarter of the responses were analysed. For each question responses were sampled from every institution, and across the four open-ended questions, at least one response for every practitioner was included in the analysis.

Although practitioners were free to express any view, their responses were limited by time and the space they had to write in, and it was obviously impossible to ask for additional information or clarification. Consequently, the depth of information is limited and there is no guarantee that answers were comprehensive. Since practitioners may have held views that they did not put down on paper, one must be cautious when drawing conclusions about how representative particular views are. Nevertheless, practitioners' comments provide valuable insights into the processes through which FE generates wider benefits for individuals and the community.

Earlier we have seen that the ways in which practitioners ranked wider benefits indicates that benefits group together conceptually. These groupings are used throughout the report. Responses to open-ended questions about perceived wider

benefits fell broadly into these groupings. Not surprisingly, practitioners made connections between them, most often concerning the process through which self-efficacy, mental health, attitudes and values feed into the development of adults who make positive contributions to society. Below we present findings from these responses under the headings of ‘Psychological health’, ‘Self-efficacy’, ‘Citizenship’, and ‘Community’. As might be expected from the low levels at which they ranked increased participation and interest in the political system, very few practitioners made any comments about political involvement beyond changes in attitudes and values, perhaps because they know little about student activities outside the college environment.

4.2 Typologies of benefit

4.2.1 Psychological health

Many practitioners shared the view that FE leads to achievements, belief in one’s abilities, a sense of belonging, empathy with others, increased confidence in all areas of life, a focus, sense of purpose and hope. The student derives a sense of well-being, satisfaction and fulfilment, they become happier, more at peace, and their life is enriched. A number of practitioners felt that students develop emotional, social and moral maturity through FE, and that they had developed a more balanced approach to life:-

“I see young students mature and become more responsible and develop opinions. I see adults become more confident in their own abilities which increases their sense of self-worth”.

Learning can also prevent deterioration. For example:-

“If we are not learning then we are not growing and if we are not growing we don’t seem to stand still, we just become diminished”.

Several practitioners felt that learning slows the ageing process through keeping older students active, and one practitioner indicated that a substantial part of their work focused upon the mental health needs of students:-

“We are doing more and more informal preventative mental health care – keeping people just about on the rails”.

4.2.2 *Self efficacy*

Learning is also seen as key to personal empowerment through the development of skills and knowledge that equip students to deal successfully with their lives. These skills include problem solving – “tools for finding solutions and also knowledge about where to look for solutions” – the capacity for independent thought, creativity, pro-activity and initiative, research skills, time-management, and self-discipline.

Many practitioners suggest that through their college education students develop a better understanding of their social and political environment and consequently their position in society. This understanding is crucial for the development of independent thought:-

“People need to be able to think through what they read, watch, are told. My duty is to encourage all my students to probe, enquire and decide for themselves”.

Students are helped to separate rational thought from emotional reactions. Combined with the capacities for independent thought and informed critical analysis, students are better equipped to make decisions and to respond to the world around them:-

“Being independent in mind and thoughts helps people make individual choices that are more likely to be correct and sustained”.

Students are also better equipped to understand and deal with systems, for example, educational and political systems. Many practitioners mention “advocacy” as a wider benefit of learning. As students develop confidence and understanding, they are

“enabled to move beyond the familiar to more challenging situations”. Through FE, students find out about new opportunities and believe that they can attain new goals. As one practitioner puts it, FE “opens doors that students did not even know existed”. It “increases the range of activities to engage in that prove rewarding and/or enjoyable”.

For students who are unemployed or in “dead end” jobs, college is seen by practitioners to provide the “only way out”. It is the “only way to achieve something in their lives”. On the other hand, several practitioners make the point that FE can raise career aspirations more than prospects in an over-competitive world where appropriate jobs are in short supply. Poignantly, one practitioner describes the idea that courses improve employability as a “confidence trick”.

Apart from progression into employment, another outcome of learning is motivation to continue learning, for FE appears to “cultivate the confidence in people that they can learn throughout life, and it is worthwhile for its own sake”. Thus, we see a positive spiral of learning, which:-

“increases abilities to maximise opportunities in all aspects of personal, family and community living, to make a worthwhile contribution to society”.

4.2.3 Citizenship

In response to an open-ended question about the benefits that FE brings to the community, many practitioners gave answers relating to wider benefits experienced by individuals. These wider benefits included self-esteem, personal development, maturity (especially for younger learners), raised aspirations, purpose and direction, awareness of opportunities, self-discipline, enhanced responsibility, development of a work ethic, active use of spare time, enhanced aesthetic awareness, and fulfilment of potential. The implication is that either practitioners had misinterpreted the question and were simply describing benefits enjoyed by individuals, or that these effects of learning enable individuals to contribute more effectively to society. Many practitioners made this second point explicitly. For example:-

“The increased skills and confidence gained by the students at the college enables them to participate more actively within their local community.”

“Once a person’s self-esteem has been raised, once they are valued, once they understand the importance of their contribution, then society is more enriched.”

Central to the citizenship benefits of FE are a whole cluster of social skills, referred to as communication skills, people skills, interpersonal skills, empathy and teamwork:-

“The students learn to work as part of a team and also to be considerate and thoughtful of their peers. They also learn to ‘share the learning’ – that is the knowledge, understanding and skill that each has as an individual”.

College is a particularly effective environment for the acquisition and development of not only social skills but also attitudes and values that promote positive citizenship because it forces diverse groups of students who share common interests and goals to work together “in a melting pot”.

Many practitioners feel that the ethos or atmosphere of their college is one that promotes “tolerance and understanding of others, their abilities and learning styles”, and “a preparedness to help others”. Such an ethos fosters a sense of involvement, belonging and community within the class, the college, and other communities.

In addition, tutors mention that FE often raises students’ awareness of social, political, cultural and religious issues. This awareness enables students to purchase a better understanding of their own position in society, which can lead to political engagement, and a greater sense of belonging:-

“Learning gives the student a greater conception of his/her own cultural, historical and social environment. It is to be hoped that this, in turn, will lead to a sense of responsibility to the environment”.

To summarise, FE promotes citizenship through developing numerous civic competences, fostering communication skills, providing a tolerant setting in which diverse groups interact, and raising awareness of social and political issues. The following quotes illustrate the importance of these factors in the formation of active citizenship:-

“If their education can develop the whole personality including positive attributes like a sense of responsibility, awareness of others and tolerance, then it cannot fail to benefit any community the student is a part of. Heightened awareness of issues, problems in society will usually lead – perhaps in the longer term – to more participation in the local community”.

“It [education] creates better citizens, with the capacity of being better informed and tolerant – more in control of their lives – can take responsibilities – can contribute rather than react or comply”.

“I firmly believe that many students who come to an FE College gain life skills as well as qualifications which enable them to be good citizens and lead full and meaningful lives which they might not be able to do without their time at college”.

It is partly because of its role in developing qualities of citizenship that several practitioners described education as a “pre-requisite to a successful and inclusive society”, and a “means of challenging society for the better”. Other mechanisms through which colleges might facilitate change in communities are through the development of social networks and the provision of resources, which are discussed in the following section.

4.2.4 Community

Several practitioners described college as a “social focus” where people from all walks of life and from a variety of backgrounds meet:-

College “provides opportunities for links, connections, working relationships between people otherwise separated socially (age / cultural / social ... differences)”.

“You see someone communicating with someone they wouldn’t otherwise know how to interact with, and you know the experience is going to inform the rest of their lives”.

This opportunity is of value to all students not least because it generates pleasure and enjoyment. Some practitioners suggested that students who benefit the most are those who would otherwise be isolated or lonely, and those who have access only because of policies aimed at widening participation, who, through access to college “no longer feel they are misfits”.

The College itself is believed to be a community because it “encourages exchanges of ideas” amongst students who “share the same interests and goals” and who tend to be “like-minded”. Friendships flourish, even amongst students whose paths would never have crossed had they not become students at the same college. Several tutors felt that life long friendships are formed through college. Students who “will work in the same industry become contacts for life.”

There was a fairly strong feeling amongst some practitioners that the colleges they work in “bring the community closer together”. This is partly because colleges serve a local community and so some students meet others living locally, whom they meet again outside college. FE in a multi-cultural community offers “positive multicultural community experiences for local students who may have negative experiences in the wider community”, and has enormous potential to enrich the local community:-

“Centrally located in a multi-cultural city we have a great contribution to make in contributing to continuing harmony and sense of community among diverse ethnicities”.

Many practitioners see their FE colleges as social, educational and cultural community resources. They emphasise that all students benefit from college,

regardless of age, background, ability and previous education. This “equates to enhancing life chances and the potential happiness of the population”. Furthermore, those who engage in education “pass the benefits on” to their families and “encourage their children to continue their educations”. The example of somebody going to college encourages others to follow suit. “Learning can become infectious, to everyone’s benefit”.

The local college is described as “part of the social fabric”. It is “a presence” set “in a prominent place in the town”, something that the community has pride in. The college “raises the general standard of education in the community”, and “increases societal self-esteem”. It demonstrates that the local community values education, and makes the local community “more comparable” with other communities. Some tutors suggest that the “enhanced aesthetic awareness in the population” that a college brings “is of enormous value.”

Colleges are described as centres of cultural activities because they exhibit students’ work and/or contain arts centres. Social and cultural events are organised through colleges, which are attended by all sectors of the local community, including disadvantaged groups. They also offer childcare and holiday play-schemes, which many tutors mention as community benefits. Leisure classes (those mentioned include poetry, yoga, dance, nature trails) facilitate and encourage “active” and “happy” use of spare time, a change from “another night in front of the television or in the pub”. Some tutors felt that colleges had a special role to play in enhancing the lives of groups who might otherwise become marginalized, for example through the provision of youth clubs and recreational activities, which “keeps young people off the streets”. One tutor suggests that college “mops up dropouts from the system”.

Many colleges have a variety of sports facilities, which can be used by the wider community, and a number of colleges are used as premises for private functions and parties. Several tutors mentioned that the college had car-parking facilities that were used by members of the community not directly associated with the college. Vocational courses often generate free or inexpensive services for the community, such as restaurants, chiropody, hairdressing, and beauty treatments.

Some tutors mention that vocational courses encourage students to use their skills for the benefit of the community. For example, in one college, adults studying horticulture, hair and beauty, and floristry provide free services to old people living locally. Other groups of students raise money to support local charities, or paint murals for local schools and hospitals. Furthermore, college participation can lead to students taking more active roles in the community on a voluntary basis, for example, becoming school governors.

Many colleges offer schoolchildren vocational taster courses, and/or make their resources available to school pupils. The resources mentioned were ICT and vocational advice and guidance. Colleges also build links with local businesses, industries, schools, play schemes, and hospitals because students on vocational courses require placements in these establishments. Colleges raise not only the local but also the national skills-base, and practitioners suggested that the provision of FE reduces the number of local people receiving benefits, especially where those leaving college set up their own businesses. In short, some colleges appear to play an important part in economic regeneration within the local community (James and Clark, 1997). Colleges can also bring students into the area from outlying districts. These students spend money in the local area, which again stimulates the local economy.

4.3 What leads to wider benefits?

As described on page 19, practitioners were asked to reflect upon aspects of students' experiences which might be expected to deliver non-economic benefits. Eight aspects of the course were suggested, plus a ninth category entitled "Other – please specify", with a box for comments. Comments in this box can be divided into two groups. The larger proportion of the responses related to aspects of courses that are specified in the question – they give useful insights into the processes through which students derive wider benefits. The remainder of the responses suggest additional aspects of courses (not mentioned in the question) that practitioners feel are crucial in generating wider benefits.

4.3.1 Interaction between students

We have seen above (page 19) that interaction between students is the aspect of students' experience that was most widely cited by practitioners as important in relation to generating non-economic benefits. This is hardly surprising given the effects of student interactions on promoting tolerance and understanding of others, development of social skills, and opportunities to expand social networks and draw communities together that are reported above. Interactions between students of different ethnic backgrounds, cultures and creeds, of different ages and stages in life, of different occupations and backgrounds were seen to have particular value.

4.3.2 Course content

Practitioners felt that students are more likely to experience wider benefits if they are "able to follow their own interests and talents and develop their own creative skills". Perhaps related to this is the feeling that in order to reap wider benefits students need "time to digress, to discuss, to inquire, to visit". Other practitioners mentioned particular subject areas.

Non-vocational classes (for example, in literature, classical civilisation, dance, drama, and media) generate satisfaction and enjoyment, widen and develop interests, foster independent thinking, develop social skills, and help individuals find direction and purpose. Courses in social sciences including business and law "require students to develop political and social awareness and keep abreast of topical events and issues", thus providing "the opportunity to locate their own experiences within wider frameworks". Outdoor and community projects were also felt to be important because they are particularly effective in developing teamwork and leadership skills, whilst recreational and competitive sport "enables many students to stay on track in formal education". Information Technology (IT) has a rather special impact on students who begin studying with little or no previous knowledge in this area (often mature returners) because they overcome their fears, realise their competence, and "marvel" at the potential of IT.

In terms of level, students particularly likely to benefit are those studying basic skills and other subjects at lower levels, who have failed in school or lacked educational opportunities previously. Through FE, these students develop confidence and become employable. Access students are also likely to benefit because they gain confidence, move onto higher education and/or obtain good jobs. This may explain the finding reported above (page 15) that practitioners who teach predominantly at Level 3 are most likely to report self-efficacy as a wider benefit. Some practitioners felt that the most able students studying at the highest levels and those who had experienced success throughout their education were the ones that benefited most. But irrespective of the absolute level of study or ability, it appears that learning at a level that is challenging for the individual student matters a great deal in relation to learning outcomes and wider benefits.

4.3.3 Responsibility for own learning

Many practitioners felt that any form of learning that requires students to take responsibility and think for themselves is likely to be beneficial in terms of non-economic outcomes. Coursework and preparing presentations for the rest of the class were mentioned as examples. Such learning provides “opportunities for students to choose topics [...] that reflect their personal interests and concerns”. Students learn to take initiative, plan their work, and prepare a finished product.

4.3.4 Teaching style

Many practitioners mentioned the importance of tutorials and the “pastoral side of teaching”. They explained that students are more likely to experience wider benefits if their teacher shows an interest in them and treats them with respect, patience and understanding.

In addition group learning was thought to be particularly useful for developing teamwork and leadership skills. These skills are developed with particular effectiveness and efficiency when students engage together in practical tasks such as community projects and outdoor activities, especially those that involve problem solving. Teaching styles that encourage active participation by students, especially

through discussion were also felt to be particularly beneficial. Assessment was seen by some practitioners as an opportunity for students to experience success, “often for the first time in their lives”. Providing “real-world scenarios relating to the student’s chosen vocational subject” facilitates transfers of skills to new situations.

Some practitioners emphasised the importance of the experience and qualifications of the teacher in relation to whether students experienced wider benefits of learning from courses.

4.3.5 Learning environment

Many practitioners, including those working in prisons mention that “inclusion, multi-cultural ethos, anti-sexist, anti-bullying policies”, and a “supportive and friendly atmosphere” are critical for developing social responsibility and awareness amongst students. As one practitioner explains:

“College values are those which accord with good citizenship”.

Practitioners also mentioned the importance of appropriate resources, and the way in which the classroom is structured. Practitioners additionally mentioned all sorts of extra-curricular activities, such as debating clubs, use of outside speakers, theatre visits, day trips and short residential courses. Interestingly, extra-curricular activities did not feature strongly as a mechanism by which learning generated benefits in the quantitative analysis, with only 27% of practitioners expressing agreement with this statement. Perhaps this is because although extra-curricular activities are seen as valuable in terms of generating wider benefits, they are only available in a minority of colleges.

4.3.6 Other aspects of courses

The most commonly cited aspect of courses, apart from those specifically mentioned in the question, was work experience and placements, and more broadly, links and partnerships with employers.

One practitioner suggested that some students benefited if they had teachers or contact with students who were positive role models, particularly in terms of gender or ethnicity. Another practitioner emphasised the importance of the use of “politically correct” language in changing students’ attitudes.

It was also felt that the availability or otherwise of community support had an effect upon what non-economic benefits students experienced through college.

A few tutors remarked that they found this question rather confusing and several gave ambiguous answers such as “sense of achievement”, “confidence”, “self-awareness”, “basic skills”, and “technical competence”, which one might think of as wider benefits of learning as opposed to the aspects of a course that are likely to generate them. On the other hand, tutors may have cited these outcomes because they are the more immediate effects of learning that often leads on to other wider benefits, such as taking on more responsible roles in the community.

4.3.7 Specific benefits for learners in prisons

Practitioners made similar comments regardless of where teaching took place. There are two exceptions. One is that practitioners working in prisons did not mention extra-curricular activities! The other is that one practitioner working in a prison suggests that students may benefit from contact with a tutor whose primary work role is outside the prison system:

“Many students say that it is very helpful for them to be in contact with ‘normal’ people, rather than officers or probation services staff”.

4.4 Which students benefit the most?

Some practitioners felt that all groups benefited from their learning, or that although benefits varied across individuals, it was impossible for them to make any sorts of generalisations about particular groups of learners. However, the vast majority of practitioners who replied to this question identified particular groups of learners who,

in their experience, tend to benefit more from the courses that they had taught or were teaching.

4.4.1 16-19 year olds

Some young students see college as an “extension of formal schooling”, take the education “for granted” and attend college in order to “avoid work”. Practitioners suggest that these students lack motivation and do not benefit as much as other groups of students.

On the other hand, FE and Sixth Form Colleges provide opportunities for motivated and engaged young people to develop the skills that they will need in order to lead fulfilling and successful lives as adults.

“Youngsters benefit from ‘moulding’ and developing themselves both academically and personally”.

Many practitioners mention that students who failed to achieve their potential at school find college a particularly rewarding experience. Students may have underachieved at school for a number of reasons including family problems, illness, lack of opportunities, being ignored by teachers, reluctance to learn, bullying, disruption, truancy, and learning difficulties such as dyslexia and sensory impairments. For these students, college offers a “second chance”.

They “realise that they CAN achieve and are not failures”.

The environment, ethos and mix of students are different from at school, students are treated as though they are adults, there are fewer “petty rules and regulations” than exist in many secondary schools, classes are often smaller, and in many colleges there is more extensive support available for students with special educational needs.

“A significant proportion of our 16-19 learners consider school as their greatest failure. It is a pleasure to see them re-engage and make progress”.

“Most students who have been totally excluded from all education achieve (over time) a much greater understanding of the need to learn, through interaction with mainstream older students”.

Many of these students make tremendous strides forward in terms of confidence in themselves as individuals and in their abilities, in terms of qualifications, their employability and the options available to them to continue with their education at higher levels.

4.4.2 The unemployed or casually employed

A number of practitioners commented that people who are unemployed use college to gain the skills, knowledge and qualifications that they need to find employment. Students who are employed, but in “dead end jobs” use education to help them to change careers. Other students are seconded from work on day release schemes or are studying a subject which relates closely to their area of work and feeds directly into it. All these groups of students tend to be studying on vocational courses. Practitioners mention two main reasons why these students in particular tend to benefit from further education. One reason is that they achieve their employment-related goals, develop confidence and gain the employment (or entry into FE at a higher level) that they wish for. The other is that these students tend to be well motivated and therefore they achieve high grades and benefit from other aspects of the course and college life.

4.4.3 Mature returners

Mature returners vary enormously in terms of age from early twenties to pensioners, but they are all students who have had a break from learning and who have chosen to return to it. Many practitioners mention that motivation to learn is the “key factor” for this group of students. There is no compulsion upon adults to return to learning, they have chosen to do so, and therefore they tend to be more focused, purposeful and dedicated. They often put more energy and time into their study and they tend to be enthusiastic about all aspects of the course. Moreover, mature returners are often particularly aware of the benefits that they derive from education and “appear to appreciate the learning process”. Indeed, some practitioners mentioned that having

mature students on a course has a positive effect upon the learning of the whole group.

Attempts to widen participation have resulted in higher rates of participation amongst mature students who have few or no qualifications. Practitioners report that in common with younger students who have been failed by the compulsory formal education system, these students often reap particular benefits from further education because it offers them a “second chance” to achieve their potential. Such students gain confidence and self-belief, contacts and friendships develop, they discover abilities and talents that they never realised they had, they feel empowered and are given opportunities to develop them:-

“Mature students benefit from having more self-worth and realising their potential”.

Adults who lacked direction often find direction and purpose in their lives. Success second time around enables these students to continue studying at higher levels and also leads to employment. However, it is not only mature returners who failed in the compulsory education system who are identified as those most likely to benefit from further education in these ways. The story is very similar for adults (often women after childbirth) who achieved at school, but who have had a long break from education and often from paid employment as well, who have lost confidence in their abilities and social skills and lack a clear sense of direction or purpose.

4.4.4 Ethnic minority students

Several practitioners argued that British ethnic minority students face dual discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity and poor educational experiences prior to FE. If gaining qualifications enables these students to move into employment or onto courses in higher levels of education, then college is thought to have benefited them more than their white counterparts, who would have been more likely to obtain employment in the first place.

For students from overseas, particularly asylum seekers and refugees, acquisition of English was thought to be “extremely important in ensuring equal opportunities”. Some overseas students who have not had many educational opportunities in their own countries are “particularly capable of reflective and accelerated learning”, and consequently achieve very high results.

4.4.5 Prison inmates

Many practitioners teaching in prisons felt that inmates benefit more than students in the community because they tend to have had very negative experiences previously in relation to education and often in relation to family background as well. Often they have a low sense of self-worth and so the potential to build up confidence and empower them to plan positively for the rest of their lives is great. Education can be seen as a stepping stone towards a goal of living a ‘normal’ and law-abiding life. It is also seen as a mode of psychological escape from their incarceration.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Diversity matters, but so does integration

This report has shown that FE is perceived to be of particular importance in enhancing self esteem, efficacy and promoting social networks. The findings, particularly in relation to the qualitative data reveal that the wider benefits of FE are extremely diverse. However, particular benefits are perceived to vary from subject to subject, between different groups of individuals, and between different types of qualification. This suggests that a diverse sector is required to provide different benefits to different sectors of the student population. As one respondent commented:-

“The more diverse the services the college offers – vocational, academic, leisure provision – the more it is perceived to be a resource for the community and not just another profit-hungry commercial enterprise in the community”.

Many practitioners emphasized the need for colleges to be accessible to the local community; the closeness of the college, affordable fees, provision of free childcare, and the provision of outreach classes held in local centres are all important. However, whilst diversity matters, a broader concern for policy makers should be that diversity does not degenerate into the ‘ghettoising’ of certain colleges or courses as ones for ethnic minorities, working class students or mature returners, which would not be conducive to the generation of tolerance and social cohesion. A great many practitioners extolled the virtues of social interaction as a benefit of FE, amongst different ages and ethnic groups.

It must also be noted that a small minority of practitioners expressed concerns over widening participation:-

“Unfortunately government policy has encouraged FE colleges to attract an increasing number of unmotivated and academically inept young people through its doors. Standards have plummeted, the environment has degenerated. Yob culture predominates and real education has suffered”.

Such disillusionment and exasperation may be a consequence of policies that succeed in attracting disadvantaged and excluded groups into the education system, but fail to provide adequate resources to enable colleges to meet their needs.

5.2 Flexible curricula and time to reflect

“Prescriptive curriculum norms militate against wider benefits of learning. Pressures to deliver vocational material in less and less time reduces the opportunities to cross-link concepts across subjects and reduces the holistic learning experience, thus diminishing the students’ opportunities for self-development”.

Rigid curricula in which there is no opportunity to digress, discuss, and follow students’ interests limits the extent to which students experience wider benefits. Additionally, fuller syllabuses reduce the time available for those discussions and

digressions to occur outside the prescribed curriculum. This aspect is compounded by the increasing burden upon practitioners to complete administrative tasks, so that little or no time is left to spend time with students outside the classroom.

Fuller syllabuses and standardised curricula make assessments of student achievement ostensibly more accurate. However, as one practitioner puts it, “learning is a process rather than a product” and perhaps there is too much of “an obsession with documenting and achieving a standard”. Practitioners in vocational subjects and subjects which lead to NVQ qualifications, did not consider that these subjects led to wider benefits, at least in the quantitative findings. If policy makers heed the accounts of these practitioners they will see that a balance needs to be struck – or different approaches employed – in order to foster and nourish the wider benefits of learning that appear to be of such value to the individual and the community. This may mean encouraging subject growth in areas such as health and the humanities where practitioners see scope for the generation of wider benefits. Here there may be conflicts between a technician and vocational approach to life-long learning, which has tended to predominate in FE, and more liberal, discursive, approaches (Jarvis, 2001).

5.3 College as a centre of activity

A number of practitioners made reference to the College itself as a resource for cultural activity within the community and a source of civic pride. In policy terms, the growth of franchising, outreach and distance learning courses may have benefits in terms of increasing participation, but the College site and staff are also a potential source of wider benefits. These include not only civic pride, but cultural activities, political activity and leisure pursuits. Colleges are seen by practitioners to be an integral part of community life, rather than as simply a provider of educational opportunities. In policy terms, this feeds into wider debates concerning the role of the college in community education and regeneration.

5.4 Further research

As a first exploration of the wider benefits of FE, the research has revealed novel and unexpected findings concerning practitioner views. The poor response rate and the

bluntness of the research instrument could have been improved, but practitioners have revealed a great deal of useful information on a relatively uncharted field. In particular, the written response section of the survey yielded exceptionally rich insights.

In terms of future research, there are a number of unanswered questions thrown up by this study. It was surprising that practitioners of health subjects were positive about all of the wider benefits of FE. In addition, it was equally surprising that there were no differences in perceived benefits between general FE and sixth form practitioners. These, and other questions, may be tackled in future research. As well as further research on practitioners, there is a need to do research in two other dimensions. Firstly, to examine the views of students who actually experience the benefits. Secondly, to examine at an aggregate level what might be the impact of the College on the social and cultural development of communities. In doing this it is hoped that a fuller picture of the extent and types of the wider benefits of FE may be ascertained.

Appendix 1: A structural equation model of perceived benefits

In order to identify how the perceived benefits of FE clustered together, the technique of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), part of structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed. SEM is a statistical modelling technique whereby theories regarding the relationships between variables may be postulated. In particular, through the use of CFA one may test relationships between latent variables or factors (that is, hypothetical constructs), and manifest or observable variables. In this analysis, there are already a number of pre-existing theories concerning how observable variables may be expected to cluster together. For example, there may be expected to be a relationship between variables such as voting and interest in politics. Figure 5 (below) shows the hypothesised measurement model for the Wider Benefits of FE with standardised coefficients. All coefficients are significant at the 5% level. The model was produced using the Amos 4.0 computer package using the technique of Maximum Likelihood estimation. Four of the response items were excluded from this final model. Two items: spirituality and physical health did not covary strongly with any of the hypothesised latent variables. Two other items: trust and rights and responsibilities could have been loaded onto several of the factors with a fairly equal factor loading. These variables could have formed separate latent variables in the analysis but following the conventions of SEM, each latent variable was identified by at least two observed variables.

In figure 5, ellipses represent latent variables and rectangles observable variables. For example, the latent variable self-efficacy is hypothesised to explain responses to the survey items on control of one's environment and the management of change. The standardised factor loadings (in bold) represent the validity of the latent construct in explaining the variance in the item. In this case, validity is very good as the factor loadings of efficacy on control is 0.81 and change is 0.82. As a general rule, factor loadings of above 0.5 were taken to be acceptable, and in only one case (community), the factor loading was below 0.6. The reliability of the latent construct in explaining variance in the items (R^2 , shown in italics) is also shown. For control and change, the reliability of the self-efficacy factor is high with 61% and 62% of the variance explained respectively. However, not all of the variance in the items may be

explained by the latent variable and this is indicated by the error terms ($e_1 \dots e_{11}$). As can be seen in the model, certain error terms are correlated, and modification indices were used in model fitting. This would mean that errors on certain items, in particular 'are more likely to participate in social networks' (social) are related to other error terms. Aside from improving the fit of the model, this assumption makes some theoretical sense as social network centrality may play a central role in precipitating other actions and behaviours. Therefore, the unexplained variance in social networks may also explain the unexplained variance in other items. One perspective on this could be that this unexplained variance is a component of individual self-efficacy: indeed, there is a significant ($p < 0.05$), if weak (0.18), relationship between the error on social and self-efficacy.

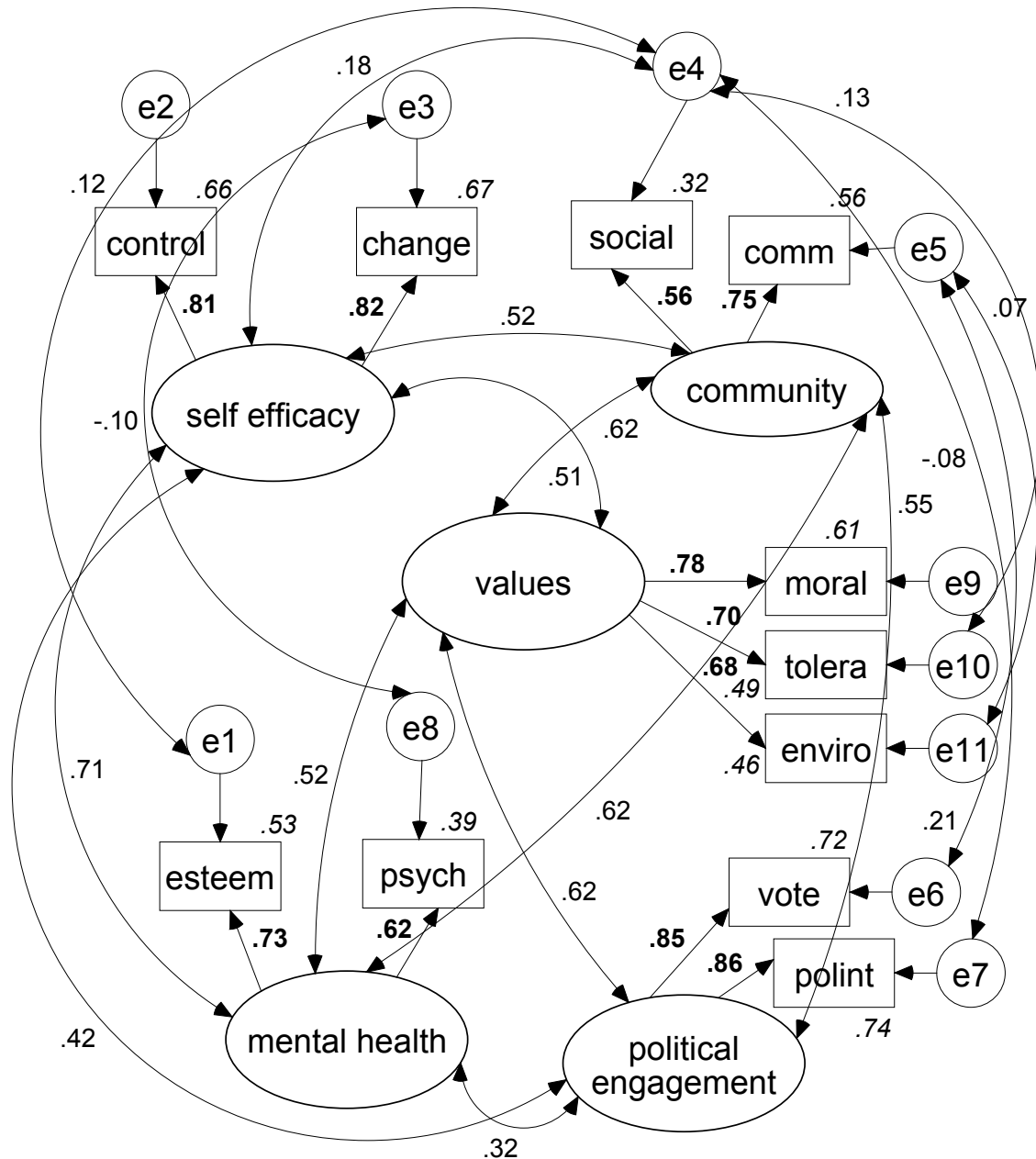
According to traditional and newer measures of model fit, the fit of the model is excellent with a Chi-squared statistic of not more than twice the degrees of freedom (38.332 with 27 degrees of freedom) and an acceptable p-value of 0.073. Therefore, we would reject the null-hypothesis that the model is a poor representation of the data. In addition to the Chi-squared measures of exact fit, by other model fitting measures, the model is a good fit using some of the criteria discussed by Arbuckle and Worthke (2000: 395-416). Both the gfi (Goodness of fit index) and agfi (adjusted goodness of fit index) are close to 1 which would indicate a perfect fit of the model to the data. The RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) is significant at the 0.05 level of significance (RMSEA= .013) and the p-close statistic suggests that there is little likelihood of the RMSEA being greater than 0.05 ($p \text{ close} = 1.0$). Finally, the AIC (Akaike information criterion) is of a reasonably low order of magnitude, suggesting a good fit (AIC=116.32).

Figure 5: A structural equation model of wider benefits

Measurement model for perceived benefits of FE

Standardized estimates

chi-square=38.332 df=27 p-value=.073 gfi=.997 agfi=.994
aic=116.332 rmsea=.013 pclose=1.000



As this model shows, the conception of benefits by practitioners may be thought to form five main factors. There is always a risk in labelling factors that the ‘nominalistic fallacy’ will result, that is believing that giving something a name

ensures that we make it what we call it. However, these items do comprise theoretically meaningful and well corroborated clusters of attitudes.

Self-efficacy relates to the degree which learning aids individuals in establishing control over their own life and explains strongly responses to items on control and change. This factor is strongly correlated with mental health (0.71), although attempts to produce a single factor incorporating both self-efficacy and self-esteem items was not conducive to the overall model fit. Mental health comprises both self-esteem and improved psychological health.

Values as a factor explains responses to learning and morality, tolerance and the environment. Each of these items has a high factor loading, which suggests that they may form a related cluster of values for these practitioners. There are close correlations between values, community and politics. Community represents attitudes towards learning and the formation of social networks (social) and community involvement (comm.) whereas politics represents political interest (polint) and voting (vote).

Unexpectedly, there is a high correlation between mental health and community (0.62). This may suggest that practitioners believe that social networks or participation in the community are the basis for higher self-esteem and psychological health. Alternatively, the causality may run the other way with mental health as a prerequisite for involvement. There is also a strong correlation between community and values (0.62). Again, this could indicate the perceived importance of community participation in the construction of values, or alternatively that certain clusters of values may influence individuals to take part. It would be wrong to infer the direction of causality from this data. However, there appears to be a perceived relationship in practitioners' minds between individual level properties such as esteem, psychological health, values and social aspects of network formation and participation in the community.

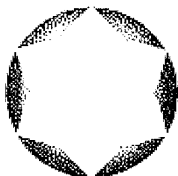
Appendix 2: Coefficients and model fit for OLS regressions

Variable	efficacy		Values		commune		mentalhl		Politica	
	Coeff.	(S.E.)	Coeff.	(S.E.)	Coeff.	(S.E.)	Coeff.	(S.E.)	Coeff.	(S.E.)
Constant	3.670	.070*	3.272	.069*	3.616	.070*	3.935	.063*	2.790	.080*
Health subject	.197	.058*	.409	.058*	.174	.059*	.345	.053*	.223	.066*
Service subject	.049	.043	-.007	.043	-.074	.043	-.061	.039	.150	.049*
Support subject	.276	.055*	.087	.055	.058	.056	.190	.050*	.225	.063
Art subject	.031	.048	.043	.048	-.085	.048	-.074	.043	-.027	.055
Humanities subject	.110	.049	.286	.048*	.186	.049*	.052	.044	.464	.055*
Over 19 groups	-.050	.034	.084	.034*	-.108	.034*	-.154	.031*	.056	.039
Level 3 groups	.122	.035*	.089	.035*	-.026	.035	.028	.031	.124	.040*
Level 4+ groups	-.010	.056	.014	.056	.093	.057	.079	.051	-.159	.064*
Ethnic mix of students	-.036	.031	-.056	.031	.039	.031	-.027	.028	.010	.035
Manager	-.013	.037	-.005	.037	.001	.037	-.041	.033	-.055	.042
Part time	.090	.031*	.105	.031*	.023	.031	.047	.028	.084	.035*
Female practitioner	-.063	.030	-.036	.029	-.097	.030*	-.114	.027*	-.023	.034
General Vocational	.068	.040	.030	.040	.100	.040*	.062	.036	-.087	.046
Vocational	.031	.046	.021	.045	.085	.046	.021	.041	-.140	.052*

subject										
Access	.248	.067*	.001	.067	.108	.068	.160	.061*	.215	.077*
subject										
Professional	.206	.065*	.061	.065	-.047	.066	.083	.059	.075	.074
Qualification										
Sixth Form	-.018	.044	-.017	.044	.028	.045	-.022	.040	-.012	.051
College										
Tenure>5yrs	-.060	.057	-.082	.057	-.052	.057	-.143	.051*	-.113	.065
R squared	.035		.065		.044		.082		.097	

(*: significant at the 5% level of confidence, N=2484)

Appendix 3: Questionnaire



Dear Colleague

The Department of Education and Employment has established the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre here at the Institute of Education. As the name implies our interest lies in the benefits of learning that arise indirectly from the curriculum, especially those in the non-economic domains of health, ageing, citizenship, family life and so on.

Your Principal has kindly agreed to help us with one of our first research undertakings, which is to canvass views of practitioners working in further education on the issue of the wider benefits of their teaching. We should be most grateful if you would complete this questionnaire to help provide us with the baseline material for use not only now, but through subsequent surveys, to monitor the impact of the unfolding "learning age" on these perceptions. The survey should only take about ten minutes to complete.

Yours sincerely

PROFESSOR JOHN BYNNER
Director, Wider Benefits of Learning Centre

PS It would be most helpful if you would return the completed questionnaire, within the next five days, to your College co-ordinator.

Survey : 52



Page : 1



Learning and Skills Development Agency

A: YOUR STUDENTS AND YOU

Your students

In answering this questionnaire we would like you to consider the benefits of learning for one group of learners. We have therefore asked you to focus on the area in which you **MAINLY** teach. If your time is divided equally between the teaching of two subjects, then please consider only **ONE** of these in answering the questions which follow.

Q1 The subject which I **MAINLY** teach would **BEST** be described as being in the category of
(tick one only)

- | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Sciences | <input type="checkbox"/> | Construction | <input type="checkbox"/> | Engineering |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Business | <input type="checkbox"/> | Hotel & Catering | <input type="checkbox"/> | Health & Community Care |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Art & Design | <input type="checkbox"/> | Humanities | <input type="checkbox"/> | Basic Education |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Agriculture | <input type="checkbox"/> | Learning Support | | |

Q2 The age of students which I **MAINLY** teach would **BEST** be described as being
(tick one only)

- 16 - 19 year olds Over 19 years old

Q3 The level at which I **MAINLY** teach would **BEST** be described as
(tick one only)

- Entry level
 Level 1 [Such as NVQ1 / GNVQ Foundation / Edexcel (BTEC) CEC]
 Level 2 [Such as NVQ2 / GNVQ Intermediate / GCSE / Edexcel (BTEC) FD / Edexcel (BTEC) FC]
 Level 3 [Such as NVQ3 / GNVQ Advanced - AVCE / A Level / Edexcel (BTEC) ND / Edexcel (BTEC) NC]
 Level 4 [Such as NVQ4 / GNVQ Higher / Edexcel (BTEC) HNC / Degree level]
 Postgraduate courses

Q4 The type of qualification on which I **MAINLY** teach would **BEST** be described as
(tick one only)

- General / Academic (Such as GCSE / A Level)
 General Vocational (Such as GNVQ or BTEC)
 Vocational / Occupational (Such as NVQ)
 Access to HE
 Professional Qualifications

Q5 Thinking about the students I **MAINLY** teach

- Most (over 80%) are white
 There are a significant number (over 20%) of ethnic minority students



About you

Q6 Most of my time at work is spent

- Teaching / lecturing Managing

Q7 My gender is

- Male Female

Q8 My working status is best described as

- Full time Part time

Q9 I have been working in the Further Education sector for

- Less than a year Between one and five years
 Between six and ten years Over ten years

B: THE WIDER BENEFITS OF LEARNING

Please mark only ONE answer for each question. In answering each question think about the learners in the area you have selected as your main area of teaching / lecturing in questions 1 - 5.

Q10 I believe that through their learning my students, on the whole

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Don't know / Can't decide	Agree	Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5
Experience improved self esteem	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Experience psychological health benefits	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Experience physical health benefits	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have more control over their lives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are more able to manage change in their lives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Form wider social networks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are more likely to participate in community activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are more likely to vote	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have increased interest in the political system	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have increased awareness of their rights and responsibilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have a heightened sense of moral responsibility	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are more likely to be tolerant of other ethnic groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are more likely to take care of their environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are more likely to reflect on spiritual matters	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are more likely to trust others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Q11 Which aspects of the course that you deliver are beneficial in leading to wider benefits for the learner (tick all that apply)

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Course content | <input type="checkbox"/> | Student responsibility for own learning |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Extra-curricular activities | <input type="checkbox"/> | Structuring of student time |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Interaction between students | <input type="checkbox"/> | Teaching style |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Learning environment | <input type="checkbox"/> | Sense of purpose |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Other (please specify below) | | |

Q12 If you have time, we would like to give you the opportunity to provide your own views on the benefits of learning. (Please write your answers in the spaces below, or attach a separate sheet of paper if there is insufficient space.)

- a) Aside from contribution to employment, what do you consider to be the major benefits of the College to the local community?

- b) From your teaching experience, which group, or groups, of students do you consider to have received the greatest benefits from their learning?

- c) Do you have any other comments on the wider benefits of learning?

Thank you for completing this survey, now please return it to your College co-ordinator



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The Wider Benefits of Further Education: Practitioner Views

The first paper in the Research Report Series is the result of collaboration between the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA). It reports findings from a survey of lecturers' and managers' views about the effects of further education upon students' lives and their communities. Insights into the aspects of further education that lead to these wider benefits, and the groups of students who benefit in particular ways have important policy implications for further education. For example, lecturers and managers believe that diversity in provision and integration across provision are central in terms of individual, social, and community empowerment. More flexible curricula are needed to support a rich learning environment that will draw in the widest range of learners.

The Research Report Series disseminates findings of research conducted by the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning.

John Preston and Cathie Hammond are Research Officers in the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning