**Focus Group**

****

**The group**

A focus group made up of 11 students from a range of courses, including HNC Social Sciences, NC Business, NC Health & Social Care and NC Exercise & Fitness. The group ran for a period of 14 days. For the first 7 days the facilitator added a question each day. For the second 7 days the page was left open for anyone who hadn’t had a chance to participate yet to join in.

**Aim of the session**

The aims of the group were to (1) gather learners’ views on consultation and their recommendations based on previous experience and (2) test the ‘Facebook closed group’ method of gathering learners’ views.

**Method**

Facebook Closed Group

**Resources**

You will need access to Facebook to create the questionnaire which means creating a Facebook Account or use an existing one. See x attached.

Your learners will need access to the Facebook. You can then ask them to join the closed Facebook Group.

The Facebook poll asked the following questions:

Question 1 (FB poll with option to add comments) When do you think is the best time to gather views about your learning programme? Poll options: Near the start of the course /term (after 3 or 4 weeks); Right in the middle of the course /term; At the end of the course /term

Question 2 (a) [FB poll with option to add comments] Think about all the adult learning you have done up to this point. What types of evaluation or feedback have you been asked to complete (not including this FB page)? Poll options: online survey; paper questionnaire; face to face focus group meeting; other (please use comments below to give details).

Question 2 (b) For each type of evaluation /feedback you have completed in the past, how successful do you feel it has been?

Question 3 (FB poll with option to add comments): For face-to-face feedback, who do you prefer to facilitate this? Please use the comments if you would like to elaborate on your answer. Poll options: the course tutor /lecturer; someone not directly connected with my course; other (please specify in the comments)

Question 4 (FB poll with option to add comments): When you have been consulted about your learning experiences in the past, did you ever get any feedback? Please use the comments if you want to elaborate on your answer. Poll options: Yes and I was glad because I was interested in the result of the consultation; No but I wish I had because I was interested in the result; Yes but I didn’t really mind either way; No and I didn’t mind.

Question 5: How would you like to receive feedback following consultation /evaluation?

Question 6: What do you think of using a closed Facebook group like this as a way for learning providers to gather feedback? What do you think the pros and cons have been?

Question 7: If you could wave a magic wand tomorrow, what would your wish be for adult learning?

**Timings**

The Facebook was created and participants asked to contribute their thoughts. There was no timescale imposed on participation in the group.

**The Results**

Eleven students were members of the closed Facebook group. Of those, nine actively participated, in varying degrees, by adding comments and /or voting in the polls. The result is a wealth of information, from short, relatively informal contributions to longer and more considered responses …all of equal value in gathering feedback and opinions. Participants were able to go back and edit responses or add second comments after thinking about a question for longer or after reading another student’s comment. As the group lasted for a longer period than a one off meeting a sense of community started to develop towards the end of the first week with students on different courses interacting and referring to others’ comments in their replies.

**What impact might this activity have on the organisation involved?**

* An opportunity to pass on positive feedback to staff
* An opportunity to discuss the solution to issues raised in the group NB care would have to be taken to protect the anonymity of the students … on more than one occasion, participants mentioned the protection of a closed group so they could share what they really feel without the fear of repercussions.
* The organisation might with to explore the possibility of keeping a Students’ Association closed group running to

**What impact might this have on local or national planning for adult learning?**

* Raises awareness of what is important to learners
* Demonstrates how a less formal method of gathering feedback can work

**How are expectations generated through engagement managed after meeting the group?**

All respondents to the question about receiving feedback indicated that they like to know the outcome of consultations. A copy of the final report from this project should be made available to everyone who participated in the group.

**Reflection on /evaluation of method**

The method was very well received by the participants. It is a flexible and convenient way for students to dip in and out of a consultation. As one student pointed out ‘…this is incredibly important when you consider the sheer workload that many students have and small considerations which tailor research around students are likely to be more effective.’ Participants seemed to feel able to share their views without fear of repercussions. Confidentiality, therefore, is a very important consideration when using this method and it is likely to work best with one facilitator and not too many representatives of the learning organisation are in the group for that reason. Students’ names are visible to everyone in the group, so a small group where a feeling of trust can be encouraged, would be preferable to a very large group.

For the facilitator, this method is more time consuming than a one off meeting as it is important to visit the page frequently to encourage responses and acknowledge and monitor the comments that have been made. The extra time, though, can be justified by the volume and quality of the responses received and the convenience for learners, which makes it much more likely for them to engage in the process.

**What the learners said about their learning:**

Question 1 (FB poll with option to add comments) When do you think is the best time to gather views about your learning programme? Poll options: Near the start of the course /term (after 3 or 4 weeks); Right in the middle of the course /term; At the end of the course /term

Answers:

5 /5 selected ‘right in the middle of the course /term’.

Comments added:

A: ‘I think that this is entirely dependent upon the type of information you’re hoping to gather.’

B: ‘I think it should be middle and end of year.’

C: ‘It should be constantly, throughout the year. At the start of the year, feedback on the experiences incoming new students have had should be taken and any small issues with courses ironed out. Later in the year, another feedback session would be beneficial. By this point, students should be fully embedded in the educational system and be able to give more informed answers to questions. At the end of the year, it is important to get feedback on how the preparation for final assessments was done and advice on student progression handled.’

D: ‘I agree with C. Spaced out through the year.’

E: ‘I agree with what C. says. At the beginning of their course, students’ expectations can also be given.’

Question 2 (a) [FB poll with option to add comments] Think about all the adult learning you have done up to this point. What types of evaluation or feedback have you been asked to complete (not including this FB page)? Poll options: online survey; paper questionnaire; face to face focus group meeting; other (please use comments below to give details).

Answers:

 5 /6 selected ‘online survey’ 1 /6 selected ‘paper questionnaire.

Comments added:

A: ‘Hey Jill, for FT courses I have completed annual surveys as part of the college’s quality cycle, Induction student satisfaction and pre exit surveys. The current academic year I have also completed an evaluation form when we completed units, for example Psychology A.’

B: ‘have also completed the online surveys mentioned as I think it is important to embrace the opportunities given to communicate feedback.’

Question 2 (b) For each type of evaluation /feedback you have completed in the past, how successful do you feel it has been?

 Answers:

A: ‘Full time course surveys were initially paper copies but changed to web based forms that were accessible using the student virtual portal I have also completed a number of part time courses where there was no involvement in the quality cycle which was disappointing given that a significant percentage of Edinburgh Colleges student are part time, block release or enrolled on part time communities and outreach provision. The current academic year I have also completed an evaluation form when I have completed a unit. I feel that the college’s quality surveys are a useful measure for the college, but often focus upon specific experiences and ultimately drive KPI and regional outcomes. Where there has been an opportunity to feed this back and be told what if any improvements will be made following the colleges self evaluation process there have been areas where it has made virtually no difference, this is despite there being issues which affect the quality of the learning experience. For example feedback regarding tutorials which are delivered by the Learning Development tutors being a primary example of this.’

A: ‘Overall I feel that in some ways there have been improvements, for example the Moodle virtual learning portal and lecturers utilising this resource has benefited me this year, however I am aware that this is something that has not improved in other areas. I was originally enrolled on NPA Painting and Decorating where there was limited use of VLE.’

Question 3 (FB poll with option to add comments): For face-to-face feedback, who do you prefer to facilitate this? Please use the comments if you would like to elaborate on your answer. Poll options: the course tutor /lecturer; someone not directly connected with my course; other (please specify in the comments)

Answers:

7 /7 selected ‘the course tutor /lecturer.

Comments added:

A: ‘Feeding back directly to tutors ensures that your opinions and issues are delivered to the front line staff. If you provide feedback to other parties, then it has a habit of being toned down or omitted entirely when it is passed onwards along the chain. Course Review Meetings with all tutors and class reps have shown to be a highly effective tool in eliminating minor problems and issues with courses. Direct face-to-face contact with tutors means that things can get tackled quickly without having to go through intermediaries.’

B: ‘I think that it's always best to have a constructive conversation with the lecturing team, however, not everyone feels confident doing this which is why the college quality cycle includes peer led reviews and other methods for gathering student feedback on the students course. I also think that it also depends on who is leading the discussion and whether in the current climate lecturers have a sufficient number of hours they can take away from planning and delivery to focus upon the quality aspect of the classroom experience. I also think that in terms of A's point about a perceived habits of communicating mixed messages and toned down content on small issues, ultimately the aim should always to have students communicating directly with their lecturer, however, I think that unless you are consistently monitoring and evaluating student feedback you will be oblivious to the fact that individual or small issues may be more widespread, that's how trends and patterns are properly identified and addressed. This is where the use of focus groups, peer led reviews, class reps are valuable opportunities to capture the student voice. I am always worried when the starting point for some folk is mistrust or an assumption that information is not representative of the views of students, and this is why there should always be an effort to engage students in their learning in a variety of ways using robust and reliable methodologies of course. This also ensures that the feedback is representative of the views of students and more importantly that it is having a positive impact upon the students learning experience.’

Question 4 (FB poll with option to add comments): When you have been consulted about your learning experiences in the past, did you ever get any feedback? Please use the comments if you want to elaborate on your answer. Poll options: Yes and I was glad because I was interested in the result of the consultation; No but I wish I had because I was interested in the result; Yes but I didn’t really mind either way; No and I didn’t mind.

Answers:

5 /6 selected ‘No but I wish I had because I was interested in the result; 1 /6 selected ‘Yes and I was glad because I was interested in the result of the consultation.

Comments added:

A: ‘Feedback has been provided during face-to-face sessions but all online surveys have never provided any kind of feedback at all and as the same issues crop up every year, it feels as if these surveys are a waste of time or an exercise the college goes through simply so it can tick boxes on performance criteria.’

B: When I studied NPA Painting and Decorating my lecturer used to meet with us on a weekly basis within a classroom setting and provide us with feedback on how we were doing and what we should do to improve. The lecturer would also give us an opportunity to feedback on how we felt we were being taught which was a valuable experience. Unfortunately this experience was exclusive to that department. I became involved in the Students Union, something that was encouraged by my lecturers who were honest and realistic about my prospects of gaining a modern apprenticeship as a mature student in a class with predominantly 16-19 year olds. My Learning Development tutor Emma Castle was equally awesome at that time and actively supported us in our learning and assisted students in developing their skills and making sense of the feedback they would receive. For example, I was told that my handwriting during assessments was not legible, my LDT organised support to help with this. This year I am given regular feedback on assessments from my lecturers. I am also able to send my lecturers emails and have a continuous conversation regarding my learning. All my lecturers are effective at delivering feedback but do so in their own ways, Mike Cowley (Sociology, research Methodology and Graded Unit) is particularly effective in this regard as he breaks down the topic so that we can see where we need to expand. My Psychology and Criminology lecturer Billie Walker recommends supplementary reading and resources and uses interactive learning resources such as media and poster exercises to help us make the most of the feedback we receive. For example, in criminology I received feedback that suggested that I needed to expand upon my explanation for why an increase in CCTV may have an impact upon the way that communities act towards one another and its implications for Social Order. My feedback included a number of activities which contextualised Michael Foucault's panoptic state which enabled me to successfully pass the assessment. My Politics lecturer Catriona Paul had been absolutely amazing at preparing us for independent learning within University, placing emphasis on helping us to develop our writing style and feedback is always accompanied with 1-1 session and our homework includes advice and resources based on our feedback.

B: Feedback on Surveys, departments self evaluation could be improved both in terms of accessible format and relevant content. Other than the Students Association, students aren't really given information on how their feedback shapes the learning environment along with other information used by the teams.

Question 5: How would you like to receive feedback following consultation /evaluation?

Answers:

A: ‘In a written format so we could reflect on the information we received.’

B: ‘Both face-to-face and also in written format. Written format can sometimes come across as cold and uncaring or sometimes feedback can appear more negative on the page than was intended. With face-to-face feedback, solutions can be raised instantly and more detail and explanation of points can be discussed. Face-to-face and written should be used in combination so each issue is addressed fully and the student has a record to refer back to if needed at a later date.

C: ‘I think that there are a number of ways that I would like information to be fed back, face to face or written. For more substantive consultations through media and in an accessible and specific circular. I also think that for wider departmental and college consultations and evaluations could be communicated to students by adopting the approach used to communicate key messages to staff through the online portal, with the caveat that it doesn't become a spam fest!’

D: ‘I think in a written format it would be good to have something documented. A face to face meeting also be beneficial.’

Question 6: What do you think of using a closed Facebook group like this as a way for learning providers to gather feedback? What do you think the pros and cons have been?

Answers:

A: ‘Ease of access is good, as social media can be accessed anywhere and at any time. Respondents have been able to take time to think through the questions at leisure and make careful, considered and full answers. Confidentiality is protected with the privacy settings provided by Facebook. All in all, I have found it to be a good exercise in providing feedback.’

B: ‘I think this is a good way to have done the feedback, it's been a good way to be honest about college without the worry of the tutors finding out and it coming back on us. There's been a lot of issues with my course and it's been a good way to vent.’

C: ‘I think that it is a good way of ensuring that when conducting research you are able to communicate with a specific online sample group. It keeps things specific to the study and you have greater control over the content. A is also spot on in relation to protecting the participants right to confidentiality, something which might be a grey area by conducting research on a social media platform.

C: ‘It's also convenient and accessible, I know this sounds terrible but I like the convenience of not having to do much in order to engage with the study. This is incredibly important when you consider the sheer workload that many students have and small considerations which tailor research around students are likely to be more effective.’

D: ‘I think it is an appropriate format to conduct and gather feedback because closed Facebook pages are aimed for specific people so they can provide truthful feedback without worry of repercussions.’

Facilitator: ‘Very good points regarding confidentiality, thanks. I'll be sure that when I report back on the conclusions drawn from this study that all comments quoted are anonymous.’

Question 7: If you could wave a magic wand tomorrow, what would your wish be for adult learning?

Answers:

A: ‘An obvious and constant wish.....more financial support, especially childcare!’

B: ‘To be instantaneous - take about 2 seconds to upload all knowledge, social experience and anything of value into the malleable minds of students. But REALISTICALLY speaking I'd wish that A. gets his wish.

C: ‘An education system that is open, accessible and funded to an appropriate level, for all ages. That was cheeky!! My more achievable and realistic wish would be a structured nationally funded and endorsed FE/HE articulation agreement into employment and Higher Education (UNI) that was strengthened by legislation that placed a much greater emphasis upon the various sectors and Independent Universities to start building a better and more sustainable destination for students.

D: ‘Better financial support, childcare is a must and increased knowledge and understanding of all processes and course content so future students has in depth knowledge of what they are about to undertake without having to resort to finding things out while going through the paces in the course itself.’

A: ‘D. makes a very good point. Communication of all sorts is badly lacking. Information about your own course and progression routes as well as information about events, societies and support available is all very hard to come by or non-existent.’