Written Evidence to Post-16 Area Reviews Inquiry
Submitted 30th September 2016

Executive Summary

1. NUS have worked with DfE since September 2015 to deliver learner voice to the area review process through a series of learner roundtables and reports. These reports have outlined learners' expectations of Further Education within their local area. The focus has been on 4 areas; quality, access, learner voice and outcomes.

2. To date, 20 roundtables have been held with student representatives from 89 colleges in attendance. 17 reports have been produced with endorsement from representatives at 76 colleges.

3. Learners consistently believe their teachers should be qualified and experienced in the industry in which they teach. Access to high-quality, accessible learning resources, including libraries, IT, study space and industry-standard equipment is seen as essential Learners also believe a high quality learning experience relies on development opportunities outside of the classroom or workshop. Some aspects of rationalisation and target teaching/non-teaching staff ratios put this at risk.

4. Cuts to local services, financial support or discounts for learners, restrictions on use of railcards and long journey times are making it increasingly difficult for learners to access FE. The potential for campus specialisation and merging of provision could push learners out of FE. Though learners have directly asked for local infrastructure to be developed in collaboration with learners, it is not clear that this commitment has been made in any area.

5. There is a renewed focus on learner voice in the FE sector shown through this process, but government need to do more to facilitate its development locally. Strategic and financial support should be provided to develop stronger, more effective students' unions, as was the case in Scotland's college merger programme.

6. The outcomes of area reviews are not clear to learners. Delays in publishing the final reports of the completed area reviews has caused concern and confusion amongst some of the student population. More needs to be done to ensure learners and other stakeholders are receiving a consistent message and given opportunity to feed into the implementation of mergers.

About the National Union of Students

7. The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of over 600 students' unions, amounting to more than 95% of all further and higher education unions in the UK. Through our member unions, including the recently formed National Society of Apprentices, we represent the interests of more than seven million students. We are the recognised voice of learners across the UK.

8. NUS membership includes student representative bodies from around 300 FE, sixth-form and specialist colleges in England, representing the overwhelming majority of learners in FE in the country.

9. In 2014, NUS also established the National Society of Apprentices (NSoA), giving a voice to 200,000 apprentices nationally and supporting the development of local apprentice voice structures through the 200 providers and employers currently engaged with the society.

Gathering learner voice in area reviews

10. Guidance on area reviews published in September 2015 set out an expectation that all parties involved in the reviews adopt some general principles. These included "A strong commitment to collaboration and relationship building across local steering group members and other local stakeholders, recognising the importance of fully understanding and taking account of the views of learners and employers"

11. Though the guidance was clear of the need to understand learner voice within the process, it did not formally outline a process for those involved in reviews to engage with learners. Furthermore, the FE Commissioner had made it clear to NUS in February 2016 that any communication about the process or learner engagement in the reviews was a matter for individual colleges, not him.

12. There is some inconsistency in the development and profile of learner voice within FE and sixth form colleges, with some colleges investing resource and commitment to student-led, college-supported students' unions and others favouring feedback and non-collective voice. As such, NUS identified the need for a dedicated process to support Area Review Boards in making an informed decision which takes account of the views of learners.

13. In October 2015, the National Union of Students (NUS) agreed with the Department for Education (DfE) and Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to develop and implement a learner voice process to be delivered in every review (see fig 1.)

14. At the time of writing, 20 roundtables have been held with student representatives from 89 colleges in attendance. 17 reports have been produced with endorsement from representatives at 76 colleges.

15. Roundtables have not happened in four areas to date; Birmingham and Solihull, Thames Valley, Surrey, Coventry and Warwickshire. In most cases, these have not taken place due to limited numbers of learners able to attend due to:

    a. Colleges failing to release learner reps from studies to attend

    b. Colleges not having student reps in place at the time of the roundtable

    c. Colleges saying that their learners "had already fed into the process," demonstrating a misunderstanding of the area review process

     d. Short notice of roundtable organisation due to swift area review announcements and inability to secure affordable venues and give sufficient notice to learners.

16. In Greater London, the four initial area reviews have been brought in line with each other, overseen by a GLA advisory board. As such, NUS is currently bringing together the findings of roundtables across the area and looking to produce a London-wide learner voice report.

Fig.1 – Learner voice in area review process.

Colleges and JARDU communicate start of review process to student govenrors and lead student representatives. Student governors encouraged to attend initial governor briefing meeting with FE Commissioner

NUS organise a student roundtable in the review area. All student governors, lead student representatives (SU Officers, Student council chair etc.) invited to attend, along with staff who support learner voice within colleges

Roundtable held. Learners are given presentation about the review process followed by open discussion on learners' expectations of FE in the area around 4 key questions:

- What makes high-quality education?

- What do students need in order to access their education?

- How do you expect learner voice to be part of new, larger institutions?

- What is important to students when they complete their education (outcomes)?

NUS collate feedback from roundtable and produce a draft report. This is sent to student representatives and governors for amendment and endorsement.

Report presented to 3rd meeting of area review steering group.

Learners' experiences and expectations of FE

17. The roundtables and subsequent reports have produced a range of areas of the student experience which learners believe should be prioritised during the area review process. These relate to the quality of the learning experience at their institution, student access to learning, learner voice and outcomes.

18. Each roundtable and report focusses on learners' experiences within their locality, aiming to bring the issues pertinent to that region to the review. However, there are a number of common themes emerging that have been raised across the country, the most common of which are listed below.

Quality of education

19. Learners consistently believe their teachers should be qualified and experienced in the industry in which they teach. They should have recent working experience in their field as well as understanding pedagogy to deliver effective teaching. Learners are concerned that stretching staff across larger, multi-site colleges and increasing class sizes in the interests of efficiency will vastly reduce their teachers' capacity to deliver high-quality learning.

20. Access to high-quality, accessible learning resources, including libraries, IT, study space and industry-standard equipment is seen as essential. Should area reviews be successful in allowing colleges the budget to invest, this should be focused strongly in this area and that merging back-office functions does not reduce access to IT or study spaces.

21. Learners want to use and be taught using digital and online learning alongside traditional teaching methods. Digital technology should enhance the learning experience rather than be used as a cheap alternative to teaching staff.

22. A high quality learning experience relies on development opportunities outside of the classroom or workshop. Learners mainly highlighted access to quality, relevant work experience in the field they were studying. Learners also said how volunteering, personal development and community engagement opportunities are vital and the success of learners should incorporate additional consideration of development of life skills, such as community integration, self-confidence and basic social and civic skills.

23. Learners are concerned that target metrics on teaching/non-teaching staff ratios will lead to a reduction in support staff, rather than an increase in teaching provision. This could severely hinder colleges' ability to offer wider enrichment activities; a serious issue that has been growing in FE since the 2011 cut to government enrichment funding.

Access to learning

24. Learners are consistently concerned about transport provision in their area. Cuts to local services, financial support or discounts for learners, restrictions on use of railcards and long journey times are making it increasingly difficult for learners to access FE.

25. Learners gave us many examples of how transport is a huge barrier to them succeeding in education. In the Marches and Worcestershire review, one learner travelled over two hours to get to college in the morning, travelling from over the Welsh border via car, train and then two separate buses, having to get a new ticket for each service they used. In Sheffield, reps told us how some learners had to pay to join and go into a local casino just to be able to use their car park during the day as the bus services to their local village to get them into the college had been cut in the morning.

26. The potential for campus specialisation and merging of provision could push learners out of FE. This point was raised, specifically about travelling from one side of the region to the other, by a student governor directly to the FE commissioner in the Sheffield City region. The commissioner's response was "Welcome to the world of work," dismissing the legitimate concerns raised by the student.

27. Learners in all areas have expressed the need for local authorities and travel companies to invest in a coordinated travel infrastructure in collaboration with students' unions, providers and LEPs which ensures affordable, accessible travel for all current and potential future learners. At the point of writing, NUS is not aware that any areas have made this commitment to learners.

28. The increased cost of living and studying for learners is a concern. The FE student body is hugely diverse, with many adult learners returning to education with caring responsibilities, or to retrain in a new trade or industry. Funding needs to be available to make sure that the cost of entering or returning to study is not a barrier to participation and help people strengthen the local economy.

29. Student support services such as counselling, pastoral care and child care are vital for widening access to FE for a number of groups. This includes having excellent facilities and services to support learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. These must be protected through any mergers, particularly where these services may be vulnerable to rationalisation of back-office functions.

30. Learner perceptions of good student support services were articulated differently for different areas; in London and the Black Country reviews for example, FE is a crucial support service in improving the future chances of young people already involved in, or affected by gang culture. Any mergers and decreases in local campuses could potentially remove this lifeline for many, putting learners at greater risk of violence from gang culture.

Learner Voice

31. Learners expect to be able to influence and work in partnership with their providers to improve the student experience in FE throughout the governance of their institution. They are best placed to know what is good and bad about their experience and what change is needed to help more students succeed. However, increasing the size and spread of colleges across an area threatens providers and other stakeholders' abilities to gain a representative, collective view of students.

32. To facilitate this voice, there is greater need to support the development of stronger and more effective, learner-led students' unions. This would ensure

learner voice is heard across increasingly large, multisite colleges and within local areas and across hugely diverse student populations.

33. There is a renewed focus on learner voice in the FE sector, evidenced through closer working between NUS and DfE, ETF support for student governor inductions, specific clauses on learner voice in the AoC Code of Governance and an increase in focus of Ofsted on the views of learners within the inspection regime. This focus now needs to extend into action to develop learner voice in FE locally and nationally.

34. To develop this, strategic and financial support should be provided. During the college mergers programme in Scotland between 2012 and 2014, the Scottish Funding Council ring-fenced funding in the early period post-merger. In August 2016, the SFC review of the college merger programme found that "merged colleges have been able to support the development of stronger and more effective Students' Associations…[and] good progress has been made to ensure that Associations are strong and effective and have a clear place and function in the daily life of the college."

35. Learners wanted to see their college make a clear commitment to working in partnership with representatives. Redeveloping a learner voice strategy in partnership with learners, with funding for students' union based on a proportion of college turnover and through commercial initiatives, such as the sale of NUS Extra cards, would be a good step towards sustainable students' union models in the future.

36. The devolution of powers to local authorities, particularly around the future of skills education and provision was a concern for learners. Learners, particularly younger learners, can feel shut out of local democracy and decision making. More open mechanisms for student representatives to communicate with and influence local decision makers should be created.

37. Learners in some areas also highlighted that having democratic students' unions supports learners to engage in civil society and offers student-led volunteering and enrichment activities. This could support learners to understand and demonstrate British Values as part of the Prevent agenda, as well as delivering key enrichment activities to improve outcomes of learners.

Outcomes

38. After the initial roundtable in Manchester, learner reps were keen to discuss what they expected to get out of their education more broadly. Whilst much of the sector is now focussed on outcomes for learners, the voice of learners in this debate has been largely absent. As such, NUS have included a section on outcomes in the area review learner reports in subsequent reviews.

39. Learners want to be equipped with the skills and experience to continue into a career, or higher education, that they are passionate about and can be successful in.

40. Wider, practical skills for life beyond education such as 'soft skills' to improve employability, political education to become active citizens, practical skills for

independent living and social & civic skills were important to be developed through FE.

41. Progress & success should be measured in some part against learners' own personal objectives. Learners feel that centralised targets for all learners doesn't allow for the skills and talents of each learner to be recognised. More work needs to be done by institutions and the sector to encourage learners to reflect on their own personal goals throughout their journey.

42. Learners feel that their preparation for entering the workplace after their studies is often lacking. High quality information, advice and guidance should be available to help learners understand the expectations that employers have of them at the end of their course, as well as offer possible career progression routes.

Reflections on the process

43. At this point, it is hard to establish the impact of the area reviews locally. The delays in publishing the final reports of the completed area reviews has caused concern and confusion amongst some of the student population.

44. Some colleges have actively discouraged student participation in the roundtable and review process. With no funding being given to NUS to facilitate this process, this has proved challenging to overcome in a minority of areas. A clearer, central message to champion learner voice locally is needed.

45. It is difficult to establish the level to which learner voice has been actively considered without the reports into the outcomes of the reviews. The Joint Area Review Delivery Unit have been supportive in trying to promote the roundtables and learner engagement with them, but NUS has received little be way of evidence regarding the discussions or minutes of area review board meetings.

46. Learners in many areas have said they are unsure of the area review process or the outcomes that have been decided. This seems to be down to huge inconsistencies between colleges and their willingness to engage and develop the learner voice.

47. The timing of significant reforms to the FE and Skills sector has impacted on the discussions and plans from area reviews. The Area-Based Review Advisory Board have regularly raised the challenge of going through area reviews before key policy plans around Post-16 reform and the Apprentice Levy have been confirmed could destabilise the review outcomes.

48. Furthermore, the lack of clarity for colleges around restructuring grants and transition loans and the delay in establishing these has slowed some of the reviews. Furthermore, we have heard anecdotally from two student governors that the need to resolve the debt issues through funding from SFA is a key factor in whether proposed mergers from the review take place or not.

49. The college insolvency regime established alongside the area review process does provide some clarity over protections for students in the event of a provider becoming insolvent. However, given the increasing personal cost of education for learners through Advanced Learner Loans, there needs to be far more clarity over

what protections and rights learners have within their educational experience and how they can seek redress should these not be met.

Recommendations and considerations

50. A clear, central communication on the outcomes and stages of implementation for each area review be produced and shared with all stakeholders. This should clearly cite opportunities for stakeholders to be consulted and influence the implementation of mergers moving forward.

51. The need to establish stronger, more effective students' unions and learner voice structures is more prevalent in larger colleges with more locally devolved powers. DfE and the relevant funding agencies must consider funding the development of students' unions in FE at least initially as has proved successful in Scotland.

52. The implications for learning and access brought about by mergers could be hugely disruptive. There must be a clear, multi-agency strategy, involving learners, to develop an infrastructure that enables learners to access high-quality vocational education to help them achieve their ambitions regardless of their background or personal circumstances.

53. A sector-wide review of FE student rights and protections, led by learners is required along with clarity over learners' right to internal and external redress.