

DfES Consultation: *PERSONALISING FURTHER EDUCATION*

UCET Response

Question 1: Do you agree with the description of personalisation?

Yes.

The description of personalisation is excellent and incorporates all of the elements of what in an earlier era would have been described as a 'learner-centred' approach. The elaboration of the main features in Annex A is particularly helpful and will communicate to all of those involved in the sector – and in other sectors, for the central ingredients of personalisation have wide applicability in different learning settings – precisely the kind of learning context they should be seeking to establish and maintain.

Question 2

Are there other key areas our discussions should cover?

Yes.

While we do not consider that there is any significant omission from the description of personalisation, we suggest that more attention might be devoted to the categorisation that has been adopted. In a commendable attempt to offer a comprehensive and detailed description of personalisation, the compilers of the paper have perhaps over-elaborated the number of categories. We see significant overlap between category 2 (*seeking and responding to the views of learners*) and category 7 (*fostering openness and trust*). We think, in the interests of economy and to avoid marking distinctions that may not really exist, these two categories might be combined. We also detect overlap between category 5 (*supporting every learner to become expert*) and category 6 (*Encouraging individuals to take responsibility*) and suggest that these also might be collapsed into a single category.

Question 3: Would a system that delivered on this aspiration begin to eliminate the disparities in success rates discussed earlier in this paper? Particularly for the most disadvantaged groups of learners?

Yes.

One of the most frustrating features of educational provision is that, despite substantial investments of resources and staff development, disparities between the achievement of different groups of learners stubbornly persist. One of the explanations for the failure to reduce disparities is that we have not been sufficiently sensitive to the characteristics of individual learners, too often being content to adopt a new approach to all, irrespective of differences in the rate of learning. Personalisation signals a determination really to take account of individual differences and for that reason might provide the break-through that is required if we are to cultivate the capabilities of all our learners.

Question 4: Are all the elements of a successful personalisation strategy captured at Annex A?

No.

Annex A provides a most helpful and fuller description of what is meant by personalisation. It delineates the aims of a strategy but it does not offer a strategy itself. That is attempted in other sections of the consultation paper.

Question 5: To what extent do you agree that the successful application of the approaches outlined in Annex A lead to better results and increased progression for learners?

Agree.

Since one of the criteria of successful application must relate to better results and increased progression, any application that has these outcomes is bound to be successful. Logically, an application that did not generate these outcomes would not be successful.

Question 6: Have we effectively captured the benefits of personalisation?

Yes.

Section 2 of the consultation paper provides a first-rate justification for the strategy and fully records the benefits that will accrue to individual learners, to employers and to the community as a whole when life-chances are made less unequal and the prospects of greater social cohesion are made apparent.

Question 7: How can providers ensure their personalisation strategies deliver these benefits, particularly for the most disadvantaged?

Providers can ensure success if they adopt two measures. Firstly, they should have in place careful and robust mechanisms for evaluating how effectively their personalisation strategies are being implemented, together with ways of monitoring action that seeks to effect continuous improvements in provision. Secondly, providers must ensure that staff undertake appropriate professional preparation and have ready access to continuing professional support. The surest way of frustrating the effectiveness of personalisation strategies is to alert staff to the demanding targets that personalisation implies but then to fail to support staff in meeting the challenges facing them. That is the surest way of inducing low morale and disaffection.

Question 8: Have we captured the correct measures of success for personalisation?

Yes.

The success criteria are excellent, comprehensive and challenging. If the sector could consistently demonstrate that these criteria of success are being met it would be of world-class. Our only suggestion is that the criteria should differentiate which are absolute measures and which are relative to previous performance. Clearly, improvement on previous performance is creditable, but not if the absolute level of achievement is low, for example by international comparisons. Both measures of success are necessary: improvement on previous performance as well as absolute levels of achievement.

Question 9: Do you agree that measuring the effectiveness of personalisation should be embedded within existing and proposed quality tools?

Yes.

Personalisation is not a process that is pursued over and above the standard approaches to teaching and learning: it is a wholly integrated approach to learning whose effectiveness must be evaluated as part of an integrated infrastructure of evaluation and quality assurance.

Question 10: What are the implications of a more personalised approach to tutorial and pastoral support?

It is of course essential to ensure that adequate systems of student support are in place and the consultation identifies the main features of a high-quality system of student support. In other sectors, personalisation has been interpreted as giving more weight to the students' voice, in the sense that providers should take deliberate steps to engage learners in the shaping of provision to increase the chances that it will accord with their learning needs. The proposals in the consultation paper make due allowance for engaging learners in this way. In commending the consultation paper for its emphasis in this connection we are aware that being more attentive to the student voice may be found to be a radical suggestion and may require some providers to effect a significant change of culture.

Question 11: Are there models of excellent practice you would share?

The national agencies that regulate the sector should have responsibility for ensuring that excellent practice is widely disseminated and there should be ample opportunity for staff to meet to share perspectives on how excellence of provision can be secured and maintained.

Question 12: Are there any further comments you would like to make?

The consultation paper does not appear to acknowledge that the effectiveness of the personalisation strategy will depend, more than anything, on the expertise and commitment of staff. We would have preferred to see rather more attention in the paper about the steps that are required to ensure that staff have the necessary forms of support to enable them to meet what is an extremely demanding programme of development.

Gordon Kirk
Academic Secretary
4 February 2007