

Understanding evidence use in adult learning and skills

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Learning and Work Institute

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About Learning and Work Institute

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Executive summary

Using findings from research and evaluation is essential to facilitate evidence-informed decision making across the adult learning and skills sector. This is especially pertinent at a time of rapid and far reaching change in how adult education is funded, commissioned and delivered. It is important to understand how and in what ways evidence is considered by commissioners, policymakers and practitioners to inform their decision making about existing and future approaches to delivering meaningful outcomes for learners.

Department for Education (DfE) have funded this project to better understand how organisations and institutions across the adult learning and skills sector engage with and use research and evidence to inform their decision making. The project will help to inform the Department as to how organisations in the learning and skills sector could be better supported to use evidence informed approaches, and how future research and outputs can be created to encourage effective evidence use.

Methodology

The project used a wide definition of evidence to ensure that the full breadth of stakeholders' evidence use was identified. Evidence included any information or data that could inform policy or practice and could be produced by a wide range of different sources. Stakeholders such as Local Enterprise Partnerships, local and regional government, further education providers and third or voluntary sector organisations. The project used a mixed methods approach, comprising an online survey and semi-structured workshops. A total of 30 respondents were engaged via the survey and 27 stakeholders took part in workshops.

Current use of research and evidence

Organisations use a wide range of evidence, identified through a variety of sources. It was more common for evidence such as published statistics, Government guidance and research reports compared to be utilised by organisations than informal evidence such as 'word of mouth' intelligence and blogs. Many organisations also have extensive experience of commissioning or conducting research. Evidence is used for a variety of reasons, with the most common being targeted engagement of specific demographic groups and to inform planning, strategy and practice.

A number of barriers to research and evidence use were also identified. One substantial barrier is the lack of a collated evidence base for learning and skills issues. This can prevent organisations from accessing all available evidence on a given topic, especially given the time and resource constraints faced by many stakeholders. There were also concerns about the validity of some evidence, and a lack of understanding amongst some organisations as to how to assess this. These factors can often lead to limited or partial evidence use or a reliance on local networks to inform decision making.

Workshop stakeholders had mixed views as to the impact of evidence on their work. Whilst all could identify examples of how they had used evidence, in some instances this related

to using evidence to justify or support existing policy or practice, rather than to inform new policy, programme or practice decisions. There was though strong support for a commitment to using evidence where possible to inform and support their work.

Areas for future research and evidence generation

Organisations in the learning and skills sector identified a range of gaps in the existing evidence base and areas for future research. Particular areas where further research and evidence is required to support their work, include understanding effective approaches to engaging and supporting disadvantaged groups, how to measure soft outcomes; and understanding what works in relation to devolution of the Adult Education Budget.

Workshop stakeholders agreed on the importance of robust evidence and identified several approaches to overcoming barriers to its effective use. These included the creation of an evidence hub for learning and skills to collate and review existing evidence, guidance on assessing and improving the validity of research and collaboration between organisations to sift and identify relevant research.

Survey respondents identified a range of outputs and approaches to sharing evidence that would encourage and support their evidence use. This included the collation of relevant evidence or guidance and its presentation in an easy-to-use format, such as evidence dashboards, infographics, statistical reports or evidence reviews.

Conclusion and recommendations

These findings reflect the variation in evidence use and the lack of structure or guidance currently in place across the learning and skills sector. Many organisations make effective use of a variety of evidence from a range of different sources; others are more sceptical of its use to influence decisions, preferring to use evidence to support their existing positions.

There is ample scope to support and improve evidence use across the sector. This should be focused on addressing barriers to the use of existing evidence, the development of new research that focusses on addressing gaps in the current evidence base and ensuring that research outputs are accessible and easy-to-use.

- 1. There is a clear need for the creation of a central evidence hub that collates and reviews existing evidence in the adult learning and skills sector.**
- 2. Mechanisms for cooperation and collaboration should be created to support knowledge building, trial development and future evidence generation across the learning and skills sector.**
- 3. The development of toolkits and training that aim to improve organisational capacity would support evidence informed decision making.**
- 4. Research and evidence generated by government and other organisations should continue to make efforts to produce outputs that support clear translation of findings and facilitate effective dissemination.**

Introduction

Research and evidence has long been used to inform public policy. The establishment of the What Works Network in 2013 has helped to bring together existing evidence in specific sectors, and further experimentation and trials of public policy. Despite the lack of a specific evidence hub in the adult learning and skills sector, there is a wide range of existing research, evidence and data to inform policy and practice.

Using findings from research and evaluation is essential in facilitating evidence-informed decision making across the adult learning and skills sector. This is especially pertinent at a time of rapid and far reaching change in how adult education is funded, commissioned and delivered. For example, the introduction of T levels, development of the National Retraining Scheme, devolution of the Adult Education Budget, review of traineeships, and ongoing apprenticeships reforms.^{1,2,3} This is in addition to businesses diversifying their approaches to in-work progression.

It is therefore important to understand how and in what ways evidence is considered by commissioners, policymakers and practitioners to inform their decision making about existing and future approaches to delivering meaningful outcomes for learners.

Department for Education (DfE) have funded this project to better understand how organisations and institutions across the adult learning and skills sector engage with and use research and evidence to inform their decision making. This has involved consultation with a range of learning and skills stakeholders through an online survey and in-depth workshops, in order to explore: the types of research and evidence stakeholders engage with in their work; the extent to which it influences their decision making and practice; the barriers that exist; and areas where further research and evidence would support improved decision making and practice.

The project will help to inform DfE as to how organisations in the learning and skills sector could be better supported to use evidence informed approaches and how future research and outputs can be created to encourage effective evidence use.

¹ Gov.uk, 2019: Adult education budget (AEB) devolution guidance. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/adult-education-budget-aeb-devolution>

² Gov.uk, 2019: National retraining scheme policy paper. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-retraining-scheme/national-retraining-scheme>

³ Learning and Work Institute, 2019: Bridging the gap: next steps for the apprenticeship levy. https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Apprenticeship-Levy_FinalReport.pdf

Methodology

This chapter outlines the project methodology. It includes the definition of evidence used in the project, the methodological rationale and details of organisations engaged in the research.

Definition of evidence

The project used a wide definition of evidence to ensure that the full breadth of stakeholders' evidence use was identified. Evidence included any information or data that could inform policy or practice, including:

- Research reports
- Published statistical information
- Briefing papers
- Government guidance documents
- Statistical data collected by organisations or partners
- Research/evaluation conducted by organisations or partners
- 'Word of mouth' intelligence
- Blogs and/or thought pieces

Evidence could be produced by a wide range of different sources, including Government departments or agencies, local or regional government, research organisations (including private and third sector), academics, charities and learning providers.

Target group

The project sought to engage with a wide range of organisations across the learning and skills sector. There was a particular focus on engaging the following:

- Local Enterprise Partnerships
- Local and regional government
- Further education providers
- Third or voluntary sector organisations

These organisations were targeted due to their direct involvement with either learners and/or the local skills and learning sector. The functions of these organisations (such as course delivery and local economic planning) are those where effective use of evidence could have the greatest impact on learners and the local economy.

Outline of methods

The project used a mixed methods approach, comprising an online survey and semi-structured workshop discussions.

The survey contained a mixture of open and closed questions. It was piloted by L&W contacts in the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) network in December 2019. The LEP network was chosen for piloting given their strategic focus on the local employment and skills sector; they were therefore well placed to assess the suitability of the survey. The survey was disseminated to 800 relevant L&W sector contacts via a unique weblink and was open from 15th January to 14th February 2020. It received a total of 30 responses.

Table 1 shows the organisation types of survey respondents. It should be noted that the survey had a relatively large proportion of responses from local or regional government, and a small proportion from learning providers. Although this may have influenced the results, it is balanced by the composition of workshop participants (see below), where learning providers were well represented.

Table 1: Survey respondent organisations

| Organisation type | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Local or regional government | 14 |
| Local Enterprise Partnership | 8 |
| Third or voluntary sector organisation | 3 |
| Higher education institution | 1 |
| Housing association | 1 |
| National government | 1 |
| Other | 1 |
| Did not answer | 1 |

Four stakeholder workshops were held in January and February 2020 with a range of organisations across the learning and skills sector. Each workshop brought together professionals in similar fields, in order to focus on evidence use for specific topics relevant to their work. Table 2 shows the number of stakeholders present, the policy and practice expertise and the organisation types represented at each workshop.

Table 2: Workshop characteristics

| Workshop | Number of stakeholders | Policy and practice expertise | Organisation types |
|----------|------------------------|---|---|
| 1 | 5 | Skills and employment outcomes for disadvantaged groups | Voluntary and community learning providers, third sector organisations, trade unions |
| 2 | 10 | Lifelong learning; essential and life skills | Local authority adult education providers |
| 3 | 8 | Adult education budgets; lifelong learning; responding to local economic shocks | Combined authorities |
| 4 | 4 | Future of skills | Local authority adult education providers, trade unions, voluntary and community learning providers |

The survey analysis involved the calculation of overall frequencies for closed questions, with breakdowns calculated by organisation type. Answers to open questions were grouped into emergent categories. The workshop transcripts were analysed thematically, under the broad themes on which the topic guide focused (current use of evidence, barriers to evidence use, areas for future research) and emergent sub-themes.

Limitations

In total, 30 respondents were engaged via the online survey and 27 via workshops. Therefore, there are limitations as to the inferences that can be drawn from the results given the relatively small sample sizes. Secondly, the project took an 'opt in' approach to recruitment. It is likely that individuals with more interest in or experience of evidence use took part which may have had an impact on the findings. While this was a relatively small-scale study, it offers detailed insights that can support future decision making on evidence generation, translation and dissemination in the learning and skills sector.

Current use of research and evidence

This chapter explores how organisations in the learning and skills sector currently use research and evidence to inform their work. This covers examples of good practice where evidence is used effectively to inform decision-making, alongside challenges and barriers to effective evidence use. The chapter explores how organisations access and use existing research and evidence, how organisations generate new evidence and the impact of evidence use on their work.

Access and use of existing research and evidence

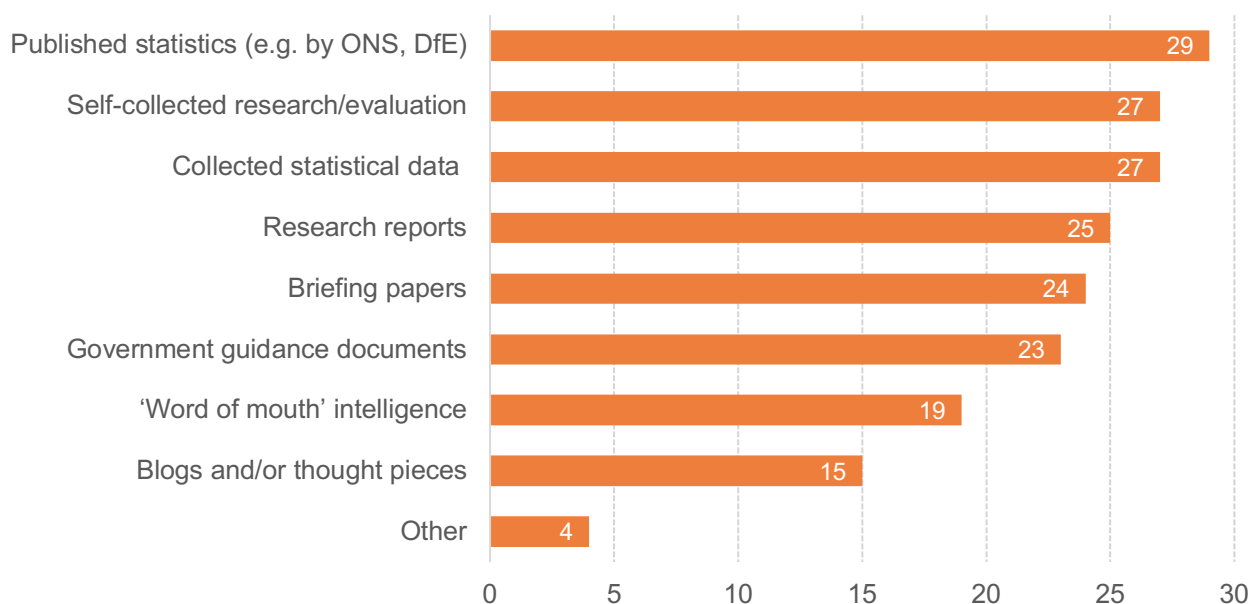
Findings from the survey show the wide range of types and sources of evidence used by organisations in the adult learning and skills sector. The most common type of evidence use reported was published statistics⁴ such as data provided by Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Department for Education (DfE); all but one respondent (29) stated that they use this type of evidence. A large proportion also use statistics collected by their own organisation (27) or research or evaluation that they conduct themselves (27). Research reports (25), briefing papers (24) and Government guidance documents (23) are also widely used, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Less formal types of evidence such as ‘word of mouth’ intelligence (19) and blogs or thought pieces (15) are less frequently used, suggesting a preference for formal research and evidence types.

The types of evidence used did not vary across organisations represented in the survey, with little difference between local and regional government, LEPs, third sector and FE providers. This demonstrates a broad consistency in the types of evidence used by different organisations in the sector. The exception to this is ‘word of mouth’ intelligence, which was reported less frequently by third sector and FE providers.

⁴ This could be publicly available statistics, such as Census data or unemployment statistics, identified through sources such as NOMIS or DfE. It could also be restricted data such as the Individualised Learner Record (ILR).

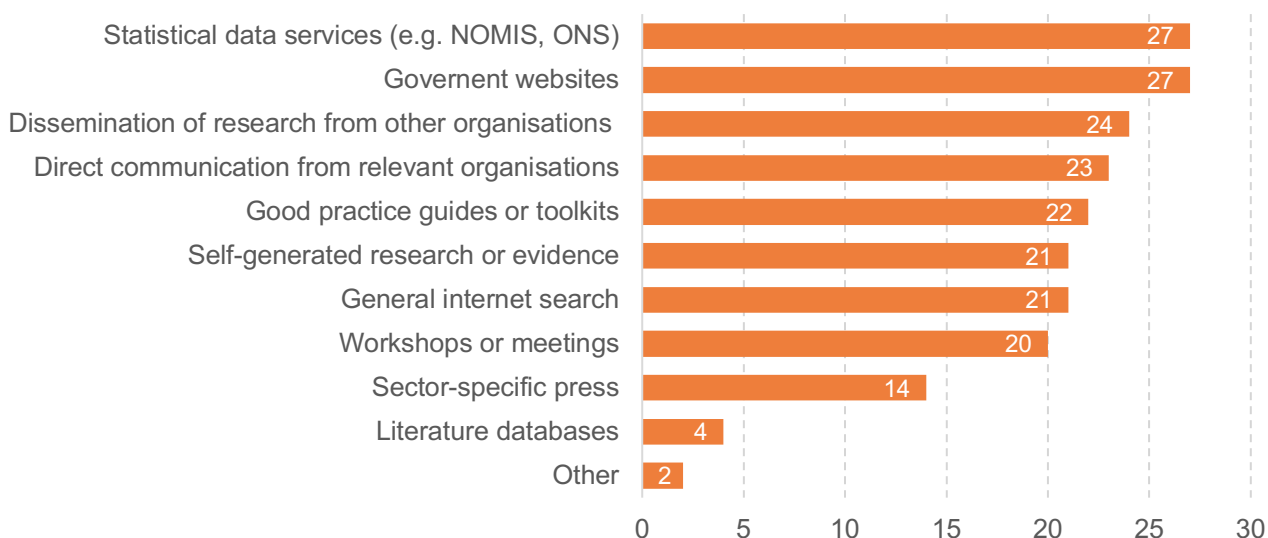
Figure 1: Types of evidence used



Most respondents also make use of information from other organisations in their respective sectors, whether that is dissemination and analysis of other organisation's research (24) or direct communications from them (23). More 'hands-on' resources such as good practice guides or toolkits (22) and workshops or meetings (20) are also used by around two-thirds of respondents. Sources that required some level of sifting of specific information (sector specific press and literature databases) were reported at a lower frequency (14 and 4 respectively).

Sources used did not vary between the types of organisations represented in the survey, with little difference between local and regional government, Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) and third sector and further education (FE) providers. This demonstrates a general consistency across different organisations, with LEPs being less likely to report the use of literature reviews and more likely to identify workshops and meetings as sources of evidence.

Figure 2: Sources used to find research and evidence



Published statistics

Stakeholders discussed the use of published national statistics. Published statistics⁵ are used by stakeholders to identify the current ‘state of play’ across both employment and skills. For example, one stakeholder described using unemployment statistics and skills data to inform their planning on where to locate courses (e.g. in areas with high levels of unemployment) and on course content. Another organisation spoke of using apprenticeship data to understand the demographics of their course entrants, intending to facilitate targeted support of specific sub-groups.

Published statistics are considered particularly useful where they have a high level of granularity, enabling stakeholders to ‘drill down’ to a local level. High levels of granularity are also useful in enabling stakeholders to examine the data for different specific groups; for example, in order to identify demographic groups with low employment rates. ILR data was considered particularly useful in this regard, with organisations who have access to it (e.g. local government) describing extensive and in-depth use. Stakeholders also described the use of specific datasets for particular demographic groups, focusing on those with particular needs; for example, older individuals or young people at risk of becoming NEET.

Region-specific data sources, such as the Greater London Authority’s Intelligence Unit, were also cited as enabling examination of the labour market through a devolved perspective. Specific examples included GLA’s ‘Quality Achievement Rates’ measure, which is used to link to softer social outcomes measures. This was described as part of a

⁵ This could be publicly available statistics, such as Census data or unemployment statistics, identified through sources such as NOMIS or DfE. It could also be restricted data such as the Individualised Learner Record (ILR).

concerted effort by a range of organisations in the sector to enable the use of soft outcomes as a valid measure for assessing programme effectiveness.

Research reports

Stakeholders described a varied use of published research reports, including both quantitative and qualitative research such as impact evaluations, process evaluations, action research and case studies. Reports considered of most use to organisations tend to be a mix of grey literature (research produced by organisations outside of the traditional commercial or academic publishing) and academic research.

Research reports were described as supporting both strategic planning and course or programme development by providing evidence on what works in specific areas. For example, one stakeholder described how their organisation regularly references impact evaluations in order to both improve the quality of their own programmes and to act as additional evidence of programme success when seeking to influence policymakers.

Stakeholders sometimes described gravitating towards using research that was smaller in scale, such as research focused on specific sectors or geographies; enabling the identification of evidence with a specific focus on a relevant area.

Motivation for evidence use

Broadly, the motivation for using existing research and evidence falls into two categories: to support targeted engagement of specific demographic groups and to inform planning, strategy and practice.

Workshop stakeholders recognised the importance of using evidence to support their work. Specific motivations included approaches to scope and identify new strategies and ways of working, such as identifying target groups for courses or programmes, improving programme design and delivery. Other motivations included using evidence to influence policymakers. Stakeholders also described using evidence to add weight or justification to their existing approach; for example, when applying for funding for an existing programme of work.

Barriers to accessing or using existing research and evidence

Findings from both the survey and workshops identified a number of overarching barriers to research and evidence use in the learning and skills sector.

As illustrated in Table 3, the most common barrier to accessing or using research and evidence is a lack of collated evidence (18), followed by access and timeliness of data (12) and a lack of research into specific topics (11). Several respondents also identified a lack of granularity of existing data as a barrier to evidence use (5).

Table 3: Limitations with current research and evidence

| Answer category | Frequency |
|-----------------------------|-----------|
| Lack of collated evidence | 18 |
| Access/timeliness of data | 12 |
| Lack of specific research | 11 |
| Lack of granularity of data | 5 |

Lack of collated evidence

A common barrier identified by both survey respondents and workshop stakeholders was the lack of collation of existing evidence. Stakeholders described evidence in the learning and skills sector as scattered and spread across a range of sources, with no clear direction as to the location of evidence or data. In addition, many stakeholders identified gaps in their own knowledge of how to choose between multiple evidence sources or datasets when more than one is available. This barrier prevented some organisations from identifying all available evidence in a specific area, and increased the resources (in relation to time and capacity) required for gathering evidence. For example, one stakeholder described an instance when they discovered that they had been using a different dataset to a partner organisation; this hampered their joint decision-making process until it was resolved.

Survey respondents identified a number of specific topics for data collation which they considered would benefit their work. These included international comparisons of FE programmes and having access to Universal Credit claimant profiles.

Validity of evidence

Workshop stakeholders raised the issues of evidence credibility and bias as barriers to using research and evidence effectively. Some stakeholders hesitated to use grey literature (such as third-sector organisation or employer developed surveys), as they considered assessing their credibility and robustness both time-consuming and difficult. This stemmed from a lack of training or guidance in understanding what good quality methodological and analytical approaches look like. Stakeholders also reported that concerns as to the validity or robustness of evidence could sometimes lead to a general scepticism regarding evidence use.

Stakeholders sought evidence that was transparent and accessible (evidence that included a detailed methodology, but also framed within accessible language and visualisation) and often limited their evidence-base to certain trusted government sources and specific academic and third-sector organisations. This validation of sources was based more on the stature and reputation of the institution, instead of any objective assessment. Stakeholders were aware that this was not optimal but cited a lack of training and time to accurately assess individual pieces of evidence.

Time and resource constraints to understanding evidence

Workshop stakeholders described resource and time constraints that limited both the quantity of evidence they were able to access and the approaches used to access it. Time spent locating relevant evidence and collating it for use directly competed with other tasks, commonly direct delivery of services, that ultimately resulted in reduced or partial evidence usage. For example, one stakeholder reported that they often only have time to read executive summaries of reports in the grey literature; others that their process for gathering evidence was sometimes limited to 'word of mouth' discussions or Google searches for short, anecdotal snippets of evidence. Time and resource constraints were often linked to the lack of evidence collation described previously, emphasising the importance of easily identifiable evidence collections or reviews. A related concern was that these constraints could lead to cherry-picking evidence based on ease of accessibility and dissemination; if organisations do not have time to gather all relevant evidence, they may prioritise that which agrees with their existing viewpoint or expectations.

Other stakeholders described how the complexity of some data sources, such as NOMIS or government statistical releases, resulted in substantial time requirements for even simple data queries or statistical analyses to be completed. Although some stakeholders employ analysts who are able to translate this data, this indicates a clear need for simplified statistics to ensure that organisations in the sector make full use of available data.

It was also highlighted that time and resource constraints can affect the ability of organisations in the sector to effectively disseminate and present evidence that they have generated themselves. Workshop stakeholders also spoke of having the potential capacity to present data, but that they lack the skills and training to do so. This suggests that some evidence generated by individual organisations is lost to the evidence base as a whole, due to a lack of dissemination of results.

Access and granularity of data

Survey respondents and workshop stakeholders identified issues in relation to access to up-to-date data. Stakeholders expressed a frustration that relevant data existed that could help to inform their work (for example, identifying impacts of learning through health records) but that they were unable to access it.

In other cases, data was accessible but considered out of date. For example, stakeholders discussed the use of Census records for programme planning and the implications of using outdated information to inform their policy, programme and practice planning.

Several survey respondents identified a lack of granularity of existing data as a barrier. A number of specific examples were given, such as a lack of labour market data at a LEP level and educational attainment data at a local authority level. One respondent also stressed the need for granularity in regional skills demand data, that highlighted sectors, specific roles and qualification levels. This is particularly important given the devolution of

the Adult Education Budget to some local areas and the requirement for local data to inform decision making.

Organisational generated evidence

Workshop stakeholders described extensive experience of generating or commissioning research or evidence. The main motivation for generating new evidence centred on investigating which groups of people are disadvantaged or underrepresented in areas relevant to the organisation's purpose, and the reasons for this. For example, one organisation conducted research to investigate why younger people are less likely to join unions, in order to increase union participation amongst younger age groups.

Stakeholders generated their own evidence to inform or support policy or practice positions as well as evaluating their own impact; for example, to inform funders and board members on quality of provision. In addition to specific examples, workshop stakeholders conducted large-scale member surveys in order to improve course and programme design, identify disadvantaged or underrepresented demographic groups and to generate evidence to support influencing policymakers.

Stakeholders generally agreed that was rare for them to generate evidence simply to expand the evidence base; rather, research generation is triggered with a specific target audience or goal in mind. This and other resource constraints ultimately affected the scope and rigour of the research and analysis undertaken by stakeholders.

The impact of research and evidence

Findings from the survey indicate that the most common way for research and evidence to impact work is informing planning, strategy and prioritisation (Table 4). This was reported by just under half of respondents (14), who described using evidence and data in as much of their strategic planning as possible. Specific examples included: to support funding applications; to inform the development of courses and programmes; to add weight to strategic policy; and to form local investment plans. However, it was noted that time and resource constraints (as discussed earlier), such as the time needed to collate relevant evidence often limited this use of evidence.

Only a third of respondents (10) indicated that research and evidence supports the robustness or validity of their work which suggests that further work is required to support organisations to generate and use evidence in this way. Other respondents reported using evidence to contribute to literature and good practice reviews (eight), to contribute to further research (eight) and to support the targeted engagement of specific demographic groups (eight). These findings highlight the varied ways in which organisations use evidence to inform their work.

Table 4: How data and evidence influence decisions and delivery of work

| Answer category | Frequency |
|---|-----------|
| Informs planning/strategy/prioritisation | 14 |
| Supports robustness/validity of work | 10 |
| Contributes to literature and good practice reviews | 8 |
| Contributes to research | 8 |
| Supports target engagement of specific demographic groups | 8 |

Several respondents gave specific examples of how evidence had impacted on their decision making. For example, one stakeholder described how they had conducted research to identify the effect of transport costs on college attendance rates. The findings identified a group of students who sat on the boundary of two income groups and would substantially benefit from a reduction in pricing. This led directly to negotiations with the bus companies to lower their pricing, ultimately benefiting those lower-income learners.

In terms of strategic planning, one stakeholder described how they use annual local economic planning research as an evidence base for setting their Local Authority investment plan. Another reported the use of local skills data to influence education-provider views on the supply of Level 4 courses. The existing strategy was to prioritise Level 4 courses, which research found to be ineffective due to skills gaps evident at Level 1. This subsequently led to the creation of a long-term plan for gradual upskilling. Similarly, a representative from a third sector community learning provider highlighted how evidence allowed them to effectively allocate resources; for example, by focusing provision on areas with low levels of basic skills. Another stakeholder described how they had conducted research which identified a substantial gap in the employment levels of individuals from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds in their area. This led directly to the commissioning of a specific fund to address it.

These findings demonstrate the varied impact of evidence use across the learning and skills sector. They indicate that many organisations make effective use of a range of evidence. However, there is also a need to further support evidence use where it currently has limited impact, by addressing barriers to use and providing guidance.

Summary

Organisations in the learning and skills sector use a wide range of evidence, identified through a variety of sources. Organisations are generally more likely to use formal evidence such as published statistics, Government guidance and research reports compared to informal evidence such as ‘word of mouth’ intelligence and blogs. There is also extensive experience of evidence generation, with many organisations reporting that they commission or conduct their own research or data collection to support decision making. Granularity and specificity of evidence is particularly valued, enabling the identification of relevant research findings for specific groups, themes or policy areas.

Research and evidence are used for a variety of reasons, with the most common being for targeted engagement of specific demographic groups and to inform planning, strategy and

practice. For example, identifying target groups for courses or programmes, improving programme design and delivery were all informed by evidence gathered by stakeholders.

A number of barriers to research and evidence use were identified. The lack of a collated evidence base or 'hub' for learning and skills research was a significant barrier for some stakeholders, particularly those who were time poor and lacked knowledge of where to find good quality evidence. The validity of some evidence was cited as a key barrier to evidence use, with some stakeholders being wary of utilising evidence from sources that were from outside their current networks.

The most common way for research and evidence to impact on an organisation's work was informing planning, strategy and prioritisation. For example, organisations in the sector used data to identify local skills needs and inform local investment plans. Workshop stakeholders had mixed views as to the impact of evidence on their work. Whilst all could identify examples of how they had used evidence, in some instances this related to using evidence to justify or support existing policy or practice, rather than to inform policy or practice decisions.

Areas for future research and evidence generation

This chapter explores areas of prioritisation for research across the learning and skills sector and how to overcome barriers to future evidence use. The chapter identifies gaps in the current evidence base cited by stakeholders and how the evidence base could be expanded and reconfigured to address the needs of the sector.

Expanding the evidence base

Survey respondents and workshop stakeholders identified a wide range of potential areas for future research. These broadly fall into two categories: gaps in the existing evidence base and potential new areas for future research.

Engaging disadvantaged groups

Workshop stakeholders described the need for further research into how to support or engage underrepresented or disadvantaged groups in programmes, courses or interventions. Stakeholders spoke of the abundance of high-level data but reported that it often lacks either sufficient granularity to identify target groups (e.g. specific demographic breakdowns), or simply does not include specific information at a useful level of detail.

For example, one stakeholder described skills gap data identifying a digital skills shortage in National Health Service workers. However, the current evidence base lacks a breakdown either of specific digital skills or occupation type. Another stakeholder reported that they had a lot of evidence about local adult learners but could not identify specific evidence about disadvantaged individuals in their area who had not participated in adult education; a group who would particularly benefit from engagement.

Soft outcomes

Workshop stakeholders identified the need for research into the ‘soft’ outcomes of adult education and training. It was widely considered that the current evidence base on skills focused almost entirely on ‘hard’ outcomes, such as progression into employment. Increasingly, stakeholders want to understand the impact of skills training on motivation to learn, career adaptability and mental and physical wellbeing. This was a particularly pertinent issue for those stakeholders who represented disadvantaged groups and where employment related outcomes were less attainable for their service users undertaking skills-based training. There was strong support for the full range of outcomes from skills training to be properly represented in future research.

Devolution

Stakeholders identified the devolution of the Adult Education Budget as an issue requiring further research. Devolution of this funding stream has resulted in divergence in approaches between local areas. This presents a range of opportunities to test and evaluate different approaches to adult learning and skills-based training. Stakeholders supported experimentation and trials across AEB areas to support a more robust evidence base on ‘what works’ for adult learning.

Additional areas for research

Stakeholders identified a wide range of specific gaps or areas for future research. They included:

- A national skills assessment that looked at demand-side skills needs and supply side constraints in providing those skills. It was suggested that this could serve as a precursor and benchmark for local analysis.
- Research on the health and skills profile of benefit claimants, and how to effectively engage and support them to participate in adult education.
- Comprehensive research on the economic benefit of adult education. Although it was noted that there has been some work on this issue, it was considered that a comprehensive assessment would help to fully engage policymakers.
- Research on how best to support disadvantaged learners to return to the labour market.
- Research on the impact of automation on entry-level job roles, particularly by region and local labour markets. It was noted that individuals in entry-level roles are often less mobile and likely to participate in retraining.

Overcoming barriers to evidence use

Workshop stakeholders considered research and evidence to be an important component of decision-making and were keen to overcome barriers to its access and use.

Stakeholders identified several broad approaches to overcoming barriers to evidence use, which are outlined below.

Evidence hub

The most consistent barrier to evidence use identified was a lack of collation of existing evidence. Stakeholders in all workshops identified the need for a central evidence hub for learning and skills to address this. A central hub that both collated and quality assessed all relevant evidence on specific topics related to learning and skills would help to relieve the time and resource constraints that can prevent organisations from making effective use of evidence, whilst ensuring that they have access to the full range of available robust research.

“Something that brings together a compendium and, like, a single portal which says, ‘If you only read five reports about adult education, it should be this one, this one, this one, this one and this one,’ all in one place, that would be really valuable.”

– Local Authority adult education provider.

Workshop stakeholders also considered an evidence hub to be useful in terms of sharing and disseminating outputs from their own research, providing a platform and method for them to do so.

Quality of research

Stakeholders suggested that simple research assistance, such as research and evaluation guidance or training on specific methodologies, could help to overcome concerns as to the quality and validity of research. This would both enable organisations in the sector to assess the quality of existing evidence and help them to generate robust new research.

The rigour of research was frequently identified in workshops, with stakeholders considering an increasing emphasis on transparency (communicating limitations of research) as important. One stakeholder suggested that, if the goal were to influence policy makers, future research and data should focus on being easily translatable and always provide recommendations or reflections.

Building networks

In order to reduce the risk of using biased or partial evidence, a number of stakeholders reported establishing trusted networks of colleagues and staff from other organisations in the field, to sift through and recommend research to inform their decision making. This idea of informal cooperation and collaboration between organisations (and extended to academics) was considered as a particularly effective way of overcoming resource and time constraints to evidence use.

Improving the accessibility of research and evidence

The survey asked respondents about the types of outputs and approaches to sharing research and evidence that they would like to engage with in the future. Two of the most common responses related to interactive or visual outputs: evidence dashboards (18) and infographics (14) (Table 5). These types of outputs collate relevant information and present it in an easy-to-use and simplified format. This can make evidence more accessible, reduce the time and capacity requirements of accessing information and support the translation of evidence.

Almost half of respondents identified evidence use toolkits (14), detailed statistical reports (14) and evidence reviews (13) as useful outputs. Again, these types of outputs can collate and present evidence or guidance in an accessible format. Over one in three respondents (11) would also like to engage with more face-to-face workshops and briefings. These are a common way for organisations in the learning and skills sector to disseminate information and enable the practical implications of findings to be discussed amongst relevant stakeholders.

Responses did not appear to vary between the types of organisations who took part in the survey with little difference between the responses of local and regional government, LEPs, third sector and FE providers. This demonstrates a level of consensus across organisations. The findings are also supported by workshop stakeholders, where there was agreement that if data was made accessible, visually engaging and collated effectively, stakeholders would prioritise evidence use more.

Table 5: Types of outputs and approaches to sharing research and evidence that respondents would like to engage with

| Answer category | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Evidence dashboards | 18 |
| Infographics from relevant sector research | 14 |
| Detailed statistical reports related to adult skills | 14 |
| Toolkits/case studies on evidence use | 14 |
| Evidence reviews | 13 |
| Face-to-face workshops/briefings | 11 |
| Research/evaluation guidance documents | 2 |

Summary

Organisations in the learning and skills sector identified a range of gaps in the existing evidence base and areas for future research. Particular areas where further research could strengthen the evidence base includes engaging and supporting disadvantaged groups, measuring soft outcomes and exploring different interventions through opportunities presented by the devolution of the AEB. Stakeholders also identified a need for some published statistics to have more detailed breakdowns to support existing and future work.

Workshop stakeholders agreed on the importance of robust evidence to underpin decision making across learning and skills and identified several approaches to overcoming barriers to its effective use. These included the creation of an evidence hub for learning and skills to collate and review existing evidence, guidance on assessing and improving the validity of research and collaboration between organisations to sift and identify relevant research. These approaches would help to reduce the time and resources required for organisations to effectively use evidence, whilst increasing access to a wide range of relevant and robust research.

Survey respondents identified a range of outputs and approaches to sharing evidence that they would find useful. The most common outputs are based on the collation of relevant evidence or guidance and its presentation in an easy-to-use format, whether simplified and visual, such as evidence dashboards or infographics, or more detailed, such as statistical reports or evidence reviews.

Summary and conclusion

Key findings

The use of evidence is essential for informed decision making across the sector, both at a strategic and at a practice level. Research and evidence can help to facilitate efficient and effective use of resources and to promote good practice. There is general agreement amongst stakeholders on the importance of evidence use in the adult learning and skills sector. Examples of actual evidence use vary across organisations, both in terms of types and sources of evidence used and in the rationale for its use.

A wide range of different types of evidence are used by organisations, with national statistics the most frequently used by those who took part in the survey. Organisations are generally more likely to use formal evidence such as published statistics, Government guidance and research reports compared to informal evidence such as ‘word of mouth’ intelligence and blogs. Organisations also have extensive experience of generating or commissioning their own research. Granularity and specificity of evidence is particularly valued, enabling the identification of relevant research findings for specific groups, topics or areas. Evidence is used for a variety of purposes. Whilst some stakeholders described using evidence to inform their strategic planning, programme design or for the targeted engagement of specific demographic groups, others reported using or commissioning research primarily to support their existing policy or practice and are more sceptical about using evidence to influence what they do.

Organisations identified a range of barriers to accessing and using evidence in the learning and skills sector. One substantial barrier is the lack of a collated evidence base; this can prevent organisations from accessing all available evidence on a given topic, especially given the time and resource constraints many stakeholders face. Other barriers related to gaps in the literature, a lack of access to some specific data and issues relating to validity and relevance. These factors can often lead to limited or partial evidence use, with evidence more likely to be used if it is from a source that is easily accessible or deemed to be reliable based on the relative credibility of the source.

Organisations identified a range of gaps in the existing evidence base and areas for future research. Particular areas where further evidence is required include engaging and supporting disadvantaged groups, measuring soft outcomes and responding to the devolution of the Adult Education Budget. Workshop stakeholders generally agreed on the importance of robust evidence and identified several approaches to overcoming barriers to its effective use. These included the creation of an evidence hub for learning and skills to collate and review existing evidence, guidance on assessing and improving the validity of research and collaboration between organisations to sift and identify relevant research. Survey respondents identified a range of outputs and approaches to sharing evidence that they would find useful. The most common outputs are based on the collation of relevant evidence or guidance and its presentation in a translatable format.

Conclusion and recommendations

There is ample scope to support and improve evidence use across the learning and skills sector. This should involve addressing barriers to the use of existing evidence, such as the collation and review of existing evidence and the dissemination of research guidance. In addition, new research should focus on addressing gaps in the current evidence base, to ensure that robust and detailed evidence is available across the sector. Consideration should also be given to research outputs, to ensure they are accessible and easy-to-use.

- 1. There is a clear need for the creation of a central evidence hub that collates and reviews existing evidence in the adult learning and skills sector.** This should include an assessment of quality and robustness and the identification of gaps in the evidence base. Standards of evidence would support policymakers and practitioners to navigate the range of evidence across adult learning, employment and skills. This would help to reduce the time and resources required for organisations to effectively use evidence, whilst increasing access to a wide range of relevant and robust research.
- 2. Mechanisms for cooperation and collaboration should be created to support knowledge building, trial development and future evidence generation across the learning and skills sector.** There is a need to generate robust evidence to support decision making across an increasingly complex and diverse learning and skills landscape. A mechanism for bringing together research, evaluation and sector experts would support the development of relevant and robust evidence that the sector requires to inform future investment and assess the impact of local and national policy.
- 3. The development of toolkits and training that aim to improve organisational capacity would support evidence informed decision making.** This would directly address skills gaps across LEPs, combined and local authorities as well as voluntary organisations responsible for designing and delivering effective learning and skills interventions.
- 4. Research and evidence generated by government and other organisations should continue to make efforts to produce outputs that support clear translation of findings and facilitate effective dissemination.** Using creative and considered approaches to the presentation of evidence, such as infographics, data dashboards and accessible written reports, are critical to support evidence informed decision making.