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ALLIANCE LIFELONG LEARNING

Measuring the Impact of Adult Education in Northern Ireland

Current Practice and Ways Forward

Alliance for Lifelong Learning research report

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March/April 2025

AONTAS The Voice of Adult Learning

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FOREWORD

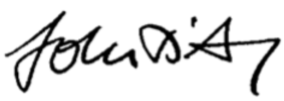
Adult Education is high on the agenda of many parts of government, further and higher education institutions and within community and third sector organisations in Northern Ireland. There are many reasons for this. These reasons include a desire to support people to gain new knowledge and skills; to help people develop personally; to support and maintain good mental and physical health; as well as developing capacity, confidence and empowerment in families, local communities and at a regional level.

Understanding the impact of adult education is crucial for funders, providers and learners alike and central to this understanding is how its impact is measured. This report provides a timely overview of adult education impact measurement in Northern Ireland - evidencing current approaches to and experiences of the impact process, highlighting success and challenges.

The approach by the research team has been to actively listen to those closest to adult education in Northern Ireland from provider, funder and learner perspectives. Hearing those voices is central to establishing potential ways to improve measurement to make the impact clearer for all involved to ensure that lifelong learning can be supported to improve not just the lives of citizens across Northern Ireland but also contribute to the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government, published on 3rd March 2025 and the Minister for the Economy's Economic Vision, published on 19th February 2024.

On behalf of the Alliance for Lifelong Learning, I would like to thank all of the contributors to this research who provided rich evidence for our team to review. The Alliance is grateful to Dr Eve Cobain and Dr Colin Neilands from our respective member organisations AONTAS and FALNI for their expertise and energy in undertaking and completing this important work.

This research would not have been possible without the support of and funding from the Department for the Economy. Since the establishment of the Alliance for Lifelong Learning in 2023, as a coalition of organisations working in the adult education sector (AONTAS, CO3, FALNI, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Open College Network Northern Ireland and The Open University in Ireland), our engagement with Departmental officials has been pragmatic and productive. We look forward to working with the Department and all other Executive Departments to discuss the findings of this research and how they can enhance the role and impact of adult education to support all of their objectives in improving the lives of people across Northern Ireland.



John D'Arcy OBE
Chairperson, Alliance for Lifelong Learning

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The researchers would like to thank members of the Alliance for Lifelong Learning for their ongoing support for this project and practical assistance in its promotion and the engagement of participants.

Our thanks go to all those who participated in the research, completing the online survey, attending focus groups and making themselves available for interview. We hope we have done justice to your invaluable experiences, analysis and recommendations.

Special mention goes to Ann Osborne (NOW Group), Anne Marie Fegan (Clanrye Group) and Anna Clarke (NIACRO) for writing the case studies that are included in the Appendix and which offer insight into the practical application of some key impact measurement tools.

We would also like to acknowledge the following organisations for supplying photographs and/or facilitating the taking of further pictures to illustrate this report:

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01 PROJECT OVERVIEW

This report takes the temperature of adult education impact measurement in Northern Ireland. It explores current approaches to and experiences around the impact process, looking at what is working well, as well as existing limitations for providers, funders and learners. The analysis is based on data collected from October 2024 to February 2025 and comprises findings from a survey (completed by 48 organisations), as well as focus groups with providers, funders and learners engaging in adult education, and interviews with providers and funders of adult learning.

The purpose of this report is not to provide a comprehensive overview of available tools or to arrive at one model that will best serve the sector. It is clear that adult education provision, and the funding that supports it, is too multifarious for a one size fits all approach. Instead, the authors seek to provide an insight into the experiences/viewpoints of the various players in the impact process and highlight some ways in which processes of impact capture might be better supported. This will enable all stakeholders to communicate more fully the contribution of the adult education sector to individual learners and community life.

The report is set out as follows:

Chapter 1: "Project Overview" discusses the nature of the project, providing background on how it evolved and outlining key aims for research, as well as considerations relating to data collection, analysis, and research limitations.

Chapter 2: "Why does Impact Measurement Matter?" begins to explore the value of impact measurement practice to the different stakeholders involved in this project, particularly providers, funders and learners. It looks particularly at the use of impact data by Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisatons, and the significance of impact data in demonstrating the value of non-formal learning options where outcomes do not result in accreditation.

Chapter 3: "What is Being Captured?" explores the ways in which the individual and wider benefits of learning are captured, as well as the challenge of finding common indices that would facilitate greater ease of reporting. The chapter examines differences in requirements between philanthropic and government funders in terms of how impact is being measured, challenges in terms of organisational capacity, and current feedback loops in the impact process. Existing processes and limitations around the capturing of longitudinal learner data are also considered.

Chapter 4: "How is Impact Measured?" provides a brief description of some of the main tools identified by stakeholders in this research, including stakeholder reflections on the models outlined. Tools used to capture impact at organisational level and learner level are discussed separately, though the two are naturally interconnected. There is also discussion around the use of written versus electronic approaches to data capture and independent versus supported assessment.

The final Chapter 5: "A Way Forward" presents some ideas around improving impact measurement that have been put forward by research participants, paving the way for key recommendations.

At the close of the report, an Appendix provides case studies/examples of tools used by three VCSE organisations providing adult education in Northern Ireland. For each organisation, a member of staff involved in the impact process provides a description of a key tool(s) used and offers reflection on how the tool supports their work, including benefits and limitations. Finally, an indicative bibliography has been provided, highlighting national and international research and resources, to help guide those interested in further exploring literature on this subject.

BACKGROUND

Following the publication of the *AONTAS Northern Ireland Community Education Census 2021-22* (2023), a conversation was established between the Department for the Economy (DfE) and the Alliance for Lifelong Learning on the need for research which would address existing knowledge gaps in the area of impact measurement within the adult education sector, with a particular focus on non-formal learning.

The Alliance for Lifelong Learning is a coalition of key organisations (Open University, Open College Network NI, Forum for Adult Learning NI (FALNI), AONTAS, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, and CO3) that provides an informed, evidence-focused, practitioner-centered single point of contact on matters relating to lifelong learning. In October 2024, DfE, via the Minister for the Economy's Skills Fund, commissioned the Alliance to undertake this research, as there is no statutory body for adult education in Northern Ireland and it was agreed that collectively the Alliance's member organisations have a wealth of relevant experience and expertise.

A proposal was put forward for the research to be conducted by AONTAS (Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation) and FALNI, who have been working together on common issues and challenges around education on an all-island-basis for many years.

AIM / RATIONALE

It can be difficult to demonstrate the impact of adult learning, especially non-accredited, non-formal learning where the primary aim is not qualifications achievement. The proposed aim of this research was to arrive at evidence-based solutions to improve data collection and impact measurement of adult education, which would:

- Help **promote the benefits**, value and impact of adult learning, especially non-accredited, non-formal and informal learning, to individuals and wider society;
- support commissioning/funding decisions; and
- support the monitoring and evaluation of funded programmes.

Non-formal learning can be broadly understood as “any organised, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p.8). Indeed, non-formal learning has many unique qualities and wider benefits, which are reported as being significant, yet are often challenging to capture (AONTAS, 2009; AONTAS, 2023; Stevens C. et al, 2019). As AONTAS noted in its *Northern Ireland Community Education Census, 2021-22* (2023), the emphasis often remains on “counting outputs” and “fails to capture the full impact” (p. 44). When it comes to qualitative data, data collection and outcomes measurement are variable and resource intensive, particularly for community and voluntary organisations which rely on short-term, project-based funding. This creates problems when raising awareness of the impact and benefits of adult learning, as well as when making commissioning/funding decisions and monitoring/evaluating funded programmes.

The VCSE sector in Northern Ireland is the largest provider of non-formal, non-accredited learning. FALNI estimates that there are over 300 community and voluntary organisations that engage in adult learning. A total of 85% of respondents to the Census (of VCSE providers delivering adult learning) reported delivering non-accredited learning, with 485 courses and 40,394 learners (AONTAS, 2023, p.11). These courses were supported by 41 different funders i.e. a mixture of national and local government and philanthropic bodies (ibid. p.34). Organisations reported working with multiple funders, with one group citing 11 different funding streams (ibid.). The Census also showed that while many positive impacts from non-accredited learning could be observed – such as personal development, health and wellbeing, and social inclusion – organisations often struggled to collect and collate impact data, largely due to a lack of resources. Indeed, as will be discussed, impact measurement does not happen in isolation but is connected to the wider funding landscape for adult education.

While a significant proportion of learning taking place in VCSE organisations was non-formal or non-accredited, it is also important to note that most providers offered a range of accredited options, which were seen as complementary in terms of providing the learner a range of choices and pathways through community education. During this research, participants were asked to focus generally on how impact is being measured for their non-formal provision, though in many cases providers spoke of processes that were in place for both formal and non-formal provision. As such, while there is often a more pressing need as well as greater challenges around evidencing the impacts of non-accredited learning, it is clear that mechanisms to capture the (wider) benefits of learning are often shared amongst accredited and non-accredited provision within VCSE organisations in line with the organisations’ overall approach to impact capture.

In developing this research, the authors also engaged with further education (FE) colleges in order to determine what mechanisms currently exist for impact capture, particularly for non-formal/non-accredited offerings, within the colleges. This was done to assess degrees of similarity/difference in terms of impact capture. Indeed, findings of this exercise may also have wider application across mainstream DfE training provision, especially at Entry Level and Level 1 where outcomes beyond qualifications achievement (e.g. development of personal, social and emotional skills) are particularly important but have traditionally proved difficult to measure.

METHODOLOGY

This research takes a mixed-methods approach. Findings are drawn from both quantitative data (e.g. survey responses) and qualitative data (e.g. focus groups and interviews). The central activities undertaken as part of this research across the three key participating groups are detailed below. To help maintain respondent anonymity, all group and provider names have been removed from the discussion and survey responses anonymised.

During thematic analysis, the authors hand-coded all focus group and interview transcripts. Coding means carefully reading the focus group transcripts and identifying the topics that come up. Patterns emerging from the data can then be used to paint a wider picture and to understand a broader context. Qualitative data from the survey was also analysed in connection with these codes. Separate codes were generated for both providers and funders, although there was a good deal of overlap in thematic areas across these discussions. As such, this report seeks to weave these voices, often addressed in silos, together throughout the discussion, exploring areas of congruence and divergence.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Research participants included adult education providers, learners and funders of adult education. The table below highlights the number of participants that were engaged across the key stakeholder groups.

		Number of Participants
Adult Education Providers	Survey	48
	VCSE Focus Groups (x3)	22
	VCSE Provider Interviews	3
	FE College Interviews	4
Funders of Adult Education	Funder Focus Group (x1)	6
	Funder Interviews	5
Learners	Learner Focus Group	7

ADULT EDUCATION PROVIDERS

Survey

As part of this research, an online survey was developed using SurveyMonkey. The survey was open from November 2024 until the end of January 2025 and generated 48 returns. The survey was open to all organisations across the VCSE sector (with 44 returns from this group). It was promoted chiefly among this group through the Alliance, FALNI, AONTAS and the NI Census Advisory Group, previously developed as part of the AONTAS NI Census. The survey was also open to FE colleges, with official responses being solicited from key contacts across the six colleges (the researchers ultimately received an official response from four of six colleges). At the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate whether they were a representative of a VCSE organisation or FE college. Responses were then filtered, to review/assess VCSE and FE responses separately. Respondents were also required to name their organisation. In order to maintain respondent anonymity, individual groups responding to the survey have not been named in this research. The survey consisted of a range of open and closed questions, with a focus on gathering qualitative responses from a wide range of providers.

VCSE Provider Focus Groups

Three focus groups were carried out with providers (generally managers) in the VCSE sector. These focus groups were designed as a series, allowing researchers and providers to delve further into the topic at hand, and providers were encouraged to attend as many of the discussions as they were able to.
The first focus group took place at the Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN NI) on 15 November 2024, with nine participants joining this hybrid meeting. The purpose of this initial discussion was to unearth issues and engage providers in a co-design process. Providers offered feedback on the draft survey and supported the design of the subsequent two focus groups. The second and third focus groups took part online, which helped to achieve good geographic spread across Northern Ireland. The second focus group took place on 10 December 2024, with eight participants, and explored the challenges faced by providers in terms of impact capture as well as the various models used to capture impact (particularly of non-formal learning) and the kind of data requested by funders. The final focus group with VCSE providers took place on 29 January 2025, with five providers attending, and provided the group with an opportunity to reflect and elaborate on the research thus far, addressing any knowledge gaps.

VCSE Interviews

Purposive sampling was used to ensure richness of data, with three organisations identified to engage in interviews with the researchers. Interviews were carried out online and in person with senior staff from VCSE organisations providing non-formal learning. Participants were chosen to represent some of the largest subsections of community learning providers (women's groups and those working within the disability sector), and to represent a range of geographical locations and organisational sizes. An initial two scoping interviews were carried out at the outset of the project (October), and a subsequent interview (in December) allowed for further exploration of issues identified in interviews and focus groups.

FE Interviews

Interviews were undertaken with FE providers from four separate colleges to inform the researchers on how impact is currently being captured in FE, particularly for non-formal courses. A representative from each college was invited to participate in a focus group on 14 January 2025, but as there were insufficient participants to hold a focus group, individual interviews were set up instead.

FUNDERS OF ADULT EDUCATION

Funder Focus Group

Researchers sought to establish contact with key government departments identified as funders of non-accredited community education in the *AONTAS NI Community Education Census 2021-2022*. Researchers also sought to establish contact with key philanthropic funders of non-formal and non-accredited education identified through the Census. A focus group discussion with six funders of adult learning took place on 26 November, allowing key stakeholders to share knowledge and practice around impact assessment (including framework development) and to share what really matters when it comes to understanding impact and making decisions around funding.

Funder Interviews

Funder interviews were conducted with four key funders of adult education, allowing researchers to drill down in terms of issues raised at focus groups. Invitations were issued to the key funders identified in the *AONTAS NI Community Education Census 2021-2022*. Subsequently, two interviews were conducted with government funders (27 November and 17 January) and two with philanthropic funders (22 November and 13 December), with five participants across these interviews.

LEARNERS ENGAGED IN ADULT EDUCATION

One learner focus group took place online on 22 January 2025 with seven participants. Learners are uniquely placed to speak about the impact of their learning and how this can best be harnessed. As such, the researchers were keen to better understand how learners feel about impact data collection in their centre and whether the tools being used could be more learner friendly. Learner participants were recruited through organisations participating in the VCSE provider focus groups. During the discussion, learners reflected on ways in which their organisation had supported them in reflecting on what they had gained from their course.

In order to gain more in-depth and ongoing feedback from learners it would be necessary to set up a mechanism to support and highlight the learner voice, such as the Learner Forum which forms one of this report's recommendations.

LIMITATIONS

The primary limitation in this research project was time. All data for the report was gathered over a five-month period (October 2024-February 2025), with data analysis and writing taking place in February 2025. As per the brief, research was to be completed by March 2025. As such, this project is to be understood as a kind of scoping exercise, which seeks to set in motion necessary conversations around the impact assessment process for adult education in Northern Ireland.

As a result of time constraints, researchers were unable to engage with some key funders, and some were unable to participate. Moreover, other relevant players in the impact process, such as employers, could not be engaged in this initial research project due to feasibility.

Not all FE colleges were able to submit an official response to the survey within the timescales or attend a scheduled focus group, so interviews with FE providers were conducted instead to ensure sufficient representation of FE perspectives in the research. This necessitated additional data analysis.

02 WHY DOES IMPACT MEASUREMENT MATTER?

A critical part of this research was to explore why impact is captured, as well as how. This section of the report begins to explore the value of impact measurement practice to the different stakeholders involved in this project, particularly providers, funders and learners.

While the reasons given for undertaking impact measurement can vary across stakeholders, fundamentally it is about assessing return on investment. Funders need to be satisfied that their financial investment achieves results commensurate with their investment and delivers against agreed outputs and outcomes. For Government funders there is the need to evidence that they are managing the public purse responsibly and operating in line with the policy direction set by elected representatives. Providers want to evaluate how the efforts of their staff and deployment of other resources produce the desired results for their learners. Learners want to see that their investment of time and energy has led to, if not exceeded, expectations.

A basic measure for formal learning provision is the achievement of a qualification or qualifications, and these results remain at the core of much impact measurement. However, most educators argue that such a measure fails to capture the full learning achievement and impact, and that other indicators should be brought into consideration: this would give funders greater evidence of outcomes achieved rather than purely quantitative returns.

Many adult returners choose to restart their engagement in learning through non-formal courses. Such learners require support to build up their resilience and self-belief, and so appropriate measurement indices are used that help assess the learner's growth in confidence, social integration, communication skills, wellbeing, etc. Tools and practices are employed to help the individual learner recognise their achievements.

Formal learning provision has largely ignored the systematic collection of such qualitative impact data. However, a considerable number of returners will actually begin their journeys in formal courses at Levels NQF or RQF 1 to 3 and have the same support needs as those re-entering via the non-formal route. Hence there is a strong argument for the inclusion of qualitative, holistic assessment similar to that used for non-formal provision.

Philanthropic funders have a longer history than Government funders of accepting (and indeed expecting) qualitative data in reporting. There is now, however, more movement throughout Government in shifting to outcome-based as opposed to solely output-based assessment, bringing it more in line with the philosophy of impact measurement (Northern Ireland Executive, *Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most. Programme for Government 2024-2027.* Whatever the desired measurement may be, if impact is to be meaningfully captured all stakeholders must be clear on why all data (quantitative and qualitative) is being requested, and how it will be used – something acknowledged by some funders in this research. As one philanthropic funder described:

> We're trying to limit the impact on our grantees, not increase it, trying to make sure that every question, all the information that we're gathering, is meaningful and has a purpose within our organisation and not just asking for the sake of doing it.

Appropriately, given the focus of this research, impact data gathered should be used to facilitate reflection and learning for all stakeholders. A number of philanthropic funders expressed a strong desire for the impact process to be an authentic and reflexive one, for the provider as much as the funder. In line with this, one of these funders noted a desire to receive "an evaluation that tells the bad as well as the good [...] there's something about learning from what doesn't work as well as what has worked, I think we would consider to be a good evaluation". This funder described the experience of impact reporting as a kind of exchange and was eager to put across the process as a highly supportive one, where feedback given would be heard and acted on.

THE USE OF IMPACT DATA BY VCSE PROVIDERS

In the survey, providers noted a number of reasons as to why they were capturing impact data, including reporting to board members, funders and staff. Promotion of services was another way in which impact data was being put to use, providing content for social media, for example, to help encourage and engage new participants into the service. Critically, most providers noted that impact work was undertaken not only for the funder but also "for ourselves". At the core of impact practice was a desire to determine whether their organisation was meeting learner needs and enabling the learner to meet their goals. Providers were also eager to evidence the wider benefits of learning, and noted far reaching benefits for those engaging with their organisation, as well as learners' families and the wider community.

Even when the directive to gather impact data around qualifications came from the funder, some providers noted that it gave organisations an opportunity to look back at their "practice" more generally and ask "What can we be doing better? If there's people who maybe haven't sustained attending training, what is it that they were missing and how can we change that to improve?" (VCSE provider). Impact data was used to identify "levels of engagement and enjoyment; areas of success" (VCSE provider) and to inform future training. VCSE organisations also felt that gathering impact data allowed them to assess "who we aren't reaching" and thus supported their general outreach activities.

Many providers described the significance of having an impact practice that would enable them to assess whether they were delivering on their organisational purpose, broadly speaking. As one VCSE provider noted, "you want as an organisation, and certainly those tasked with the leadership of the organisation would want to be knowing that you were robustly delivering on your purpose." Providers indicated that a successful impact practice would help to surface underlying issues and would not shy away from exposing challenges. As one provided noted, "data, both soft and hard, helps to be able to collectively demonstrate where we are, or if we need to refocus in some way or really pull up our socks and take stock because there are some challenges for us here" (VCSE provider).

Capturing evidence of impact was also cited as a means for organisations to secure future funding, though this came with challenges for organisations that were already resource poor. Furthermore, it was used to provide an opportunity to promote the benefits of learning and "provide evidence for relevant advocacy campaigns" (VCSE provider), better equipping the sector to promote the wide-ranging impacts of adult education, both personal and societal, on the public stage.

03 WHAT IS BEING CAPTURED?

In this section we look at what is (and is not) currently requested by funders and captured by VCSE providers and FE colleges, including the challenges faced in collection. There is also reflection on desirable changes.

Nearly all providers (both VCSE and FE) indicated in the survey that they collect a mix of quantitative and qualitative data (n=39) in response to funder requests, as highlighted in Figure 1 below. This mixed approach allowed organisations to take a macro and a micro view of how their work was impacting on the learners they were engaging.[1]

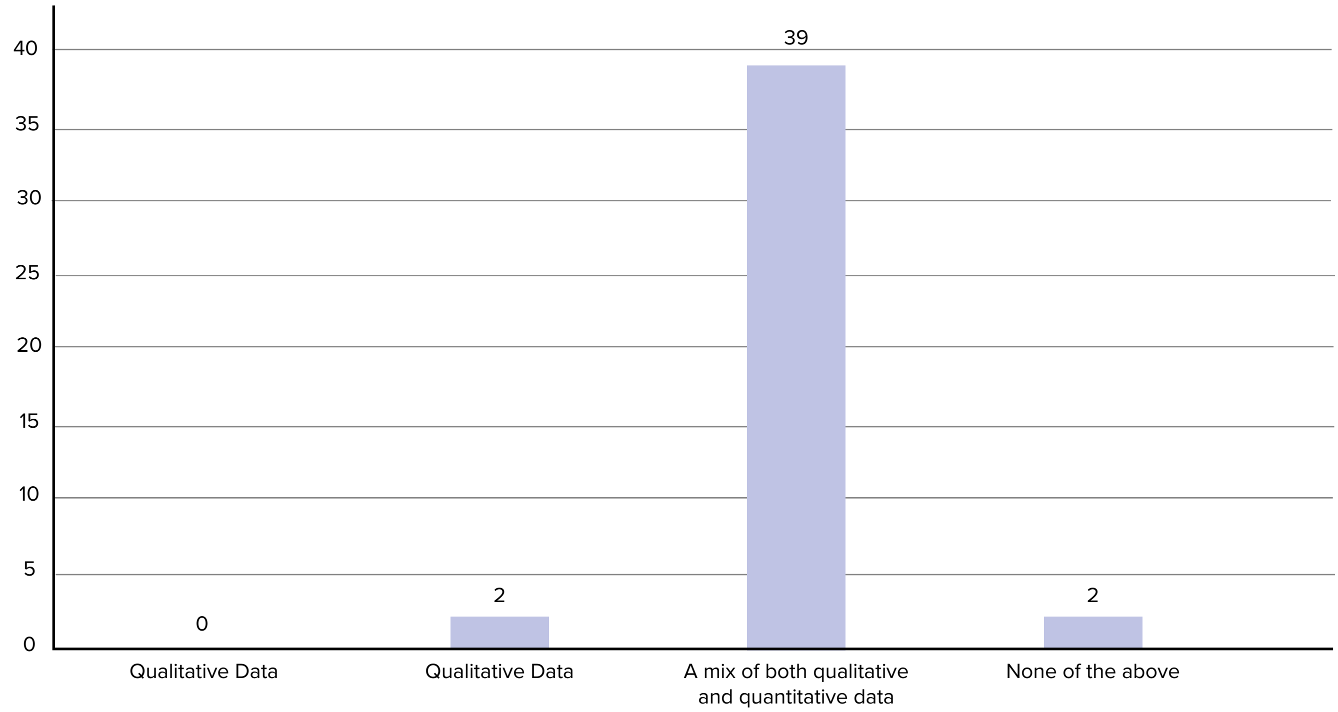


Figure 1. Responses to the question "Please indicate the type of data that funders request from your organisation."

INDIVIDUAL BENEFITS AND DISTANCE TRAVELLED

For providers (of all sectors) and for learners, capturing distance travelled is crucial to ensuring full recognition of achievement and stimulating further learning engagement. Many funders, especially philanthropic funders, also saw this approach as central. Generally speaking, philanthropic funders wanted to know about the benefits for the individual and understand how far the learner had progressed from the outset of their course. As one funder taking part in the focus group described:

> Do you feel that you would be more employable following this? Do you feel that you have better skills to manage whatever the course has happened to be about? Very much it's self-reflection of beneficiaries and what they find the outcome of the programme or course to have been.

[1] *The two organisations who indicated that they did not collect either type of data were relatively small VCSE organisations.*

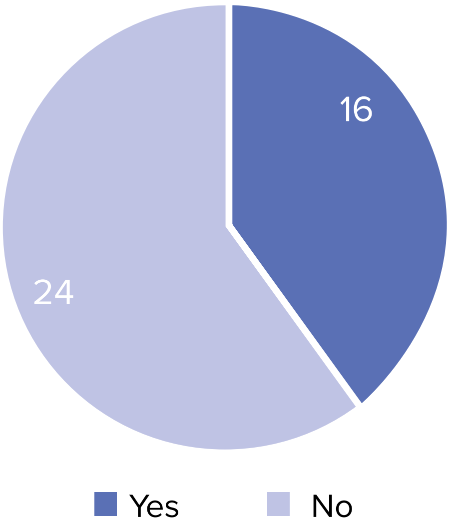
It is the experience of VCSE providers that Government-funded programmes tend to place less emphasis on "distance travelled" as well as qualitative impacts, viewing these as lesser or interesting additions rather than core evidence; this particularly occurs once provision becomes formal. Hence the plea from this VCSE provider for recognition more universally of "soft" impacts:

> The funders should take into consideration the measurement of soft skills, the measurement of the journey, the distance that the person has had to come.

The value of assessing "distance travelled" within the context of capturing individual learner outcomes is further illustrated in the Appendix of this report, in an account by one provider who utilises this approach.

THE WIDER BENEFITS OF LEARNING

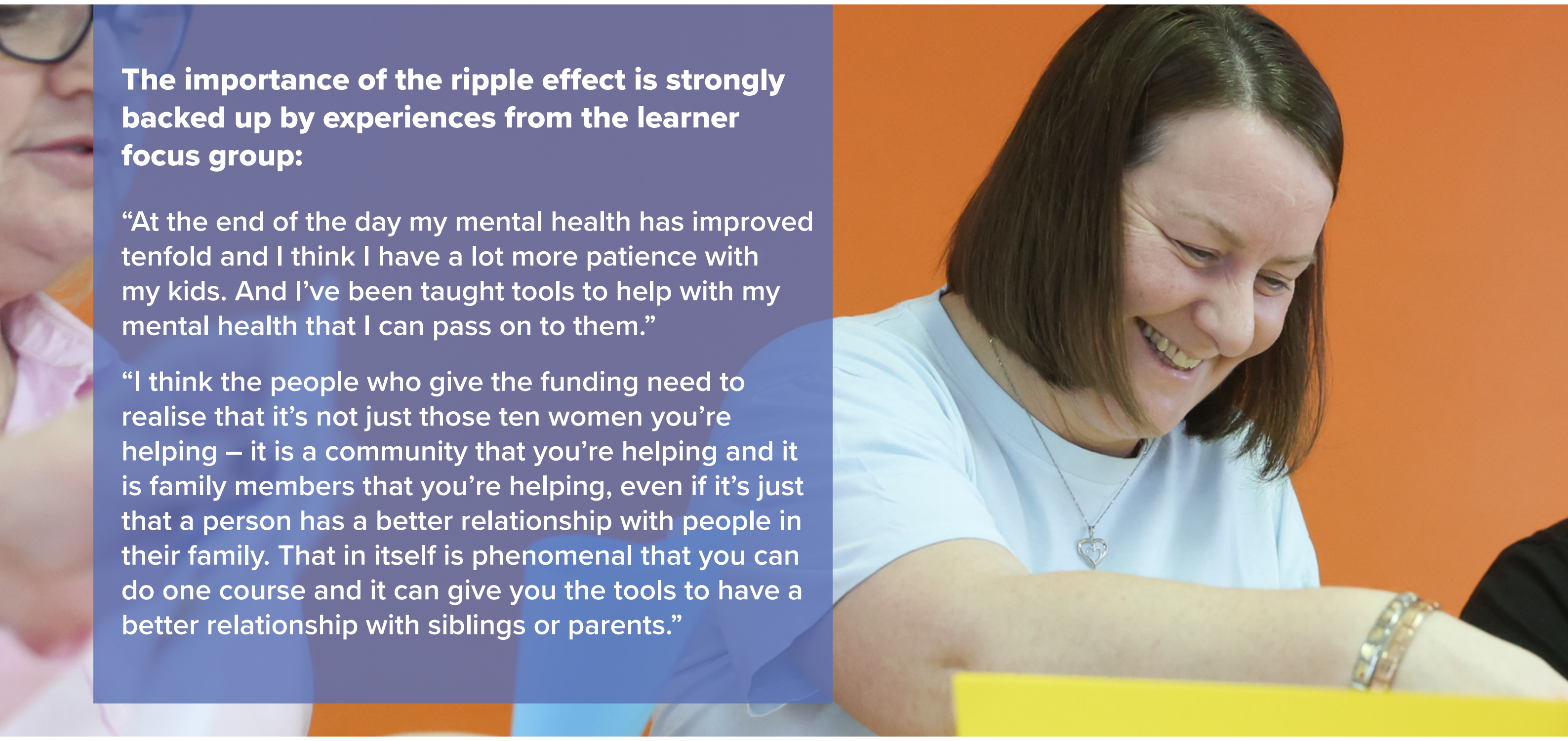
For the most part, impact measurement in adult learning is focused on the individual, but amongst providers and certainly learners it is acknowledged that individual learning ripples out to impact on families and the wider community.



As indicated in Figure 2, Survey results show that 40% (n=16) of respondents felt that they adequately capture benefits beyond the individual learner, with SROI (Social Return on Investment) and the collection of learner stories being examples of how data on benefits is collected. However, most felt that much more could be done and that they would ideally do so, but with resources already stretched to compile individual impact that would currently be too big an ask.

Figure 2. Responses to the question "Do you think your current approach to impact measurement adequately captures the benefits of learning beyond the individual learner? (i.e. to families or communities?)"

> Our current approach to impact measurement primarily focuses on individual learners and while it provides valuable insights into their personal progression, it does not fully capture the wider benefits to families and communities. For instance, we know anecdotally that learners often share their new skills or increased confidence with family members and contribute to their communities, but we lack formal mechanisms to track these outcomes. (VCSE Provider)



The importance of the ripple effect is strongly backed up by experiences from the learner focus group:

"At the end of the day my mental health has improved tenfold and I think I have a lot more patience with my kids. And I've been taught tools to help with my mental health that I can pass on to them."

"I think the people who give the funding need to realise that it's not just those ten women you're helping – it is a community that you're helping and it is family members that you're helping, even if it's just that a person has a better relationship with people in their family. That in itself is phenomenal that you can do one course and it can give you the tools to have a better relationship with siblings or parents."

FINDING COMMON INDICES

With both funders and providers there was discussion around the possibility of finding common indices that would ease workload and also allow the generation of overarching performance results for an organisation – which in turn could be collated in any future censuses of the VCSE sector. Comments from the survey include calls for "consistency across projects and identifying specific measurement indicators consistent across all programmes."

There is already some commonality of indices used. All providers identify the importance of measuring increased knowledge/skill, confidence and resilience/mental health – and while not universal, variants of these are common in non-formal assessment. These were also reported by learners as key outcomes. One learner taking part in the focus group noted:

> You don't even see in yourself from one year to the next how much your education is key for your mental health until you're able to sit down and look.

Listening to learners, the social benefits of learning also came across strongly:

> It's helped me to come back into society and reconnect with people and with women, especially [...] Without this, you can become quite isolated.

Another learner noted:

> That's a friendship now that we'll have forever and it came from participating on a course that really wasn't about making friends, it was about working on yourself, and yet we were able to work on ourselves and learn to love each other as friends.

By listening to learners' experiences, indices could be designed to capture the impacts they deem to be important, creating balance between this and what funders and providers deem to be important. Learners also shared how a good experience of learning built an enthusiasm to continue. This might be partly captured by measuring increased confidence, but there is also the sense of experiencing learning as enjoyable. If a learner is not enjoying a course, not feeling engaged, then they are likely to drop out (Lucardie, 2014). If a course has a high retention figure, then that could be taken as an indicator of learners engaging well in learning with a high likelihood of progressing.

PHILANTHROPIC AND GOVERNMENT FUNDER REQUIREMENTS

Some philanthropic funders negotiate with their grantees, or place the identification of indices and methodologies with the provider:

> We're not prescriptive, so we don't tell any of our projects that they have to collect certain information or that they have to use different methods or tools for impact (measurement).
> (Philanthropic Funder)

For the provider, such interaction is really important:

> It's also sometimes about conversations with funder as well, in the sense of what they think they want might not be what you're actually able to tell them about impact.
> (VCSE Provider)

Generally, philanthropic funders have a relationship with their grantees which is more trusting and less directive than Government funders. Their funding tends to allow for some negotiation, recognising the experience and expertise of the provider and their greater understanding of the delivery context and learner target groups. Generally, VCSE providers were frustrated by the rigidity of Government funders, while sometimes accepting that these funders are operating within many constraints and requirements:

> Statutory bodies have this "we are dealing with public money" thing and [...] they get wrapped up in trying to over-measure rather than actually trying to measure the right things as well. I guess it's how much their hands are tied in terms of those sort of things where you would like to inject a bit of common sense.
> (VCSE Provider)

Stakeholders in this research also expressed a concern over an impact process that might in some cases be driven by a "bums on seats" approach (Local Government representative; VCSE provider), not necessarily "over-measuring", but certainly neglecting to capture the right things.

In line with this, providers felt that there was not enough of a premium placed on the learner voice as part of the impact process. As one VCSE provider noted in response to the survey, while "qualitative data [is used] for our own development planning, funders tend to be not that interested in this." As such, there is clearly a significant range in terms of level of interest in receiving qualitative data from providers on the part of funders. This is often dictated by the type and amount of funding they provide, and to whom they are reporting.

While both Government and philanthropic funders request qualitative outcomes be presented as statistical data, the latter are much more likely to accept a broader range of evidence, including learner stories, which for all VCSE and FE providers are crucial to understanding learner achievements:

> [It's] being able to highlight or showcase examples of where individuals have had some kind of transformation or something game-changing in terms of their circumstances as a result of doing it. So it's [...] about capturing stories. I guess we'd always want to do that, regardless of what funders are compelling us to do. And sometimes they're interested in that as well. (VSCE Provider)

FEEDBACK LOOPS

Concern was expressed by a number of participants (both funders and providers) that while expectations were ever increasing, added layers of bureaucracy meant that efforts to communicate impact were often not being rewarded. As one VCSE provider noted, “they [expectations] have changed. And I don’t mind putting part of my working week towards that if I had the feeling it was gone somewhere or somebody even was reading it, I wouldn’t mind ...That’s not the case. That’s definitely not the case.” Concerns in this area were also highlighted as an issue by funders:

> I was at two recent conferences where a funder spoke and said [...] we’ve a 40-page evaluation and we don’t get time to read it. But the way the person said it, it was like all funders are like that. That horrified me. Don’t ask for the form if you’re not going to read it, because there could be something in there where they’re telling you something that they really need support about [...] And you’ve just stuck it in a file.
> (Philanthropic Funder)

Another philanthropic funder expressed concern that “we’ve gone completely bonkers in relation to outcomes”, denouncing demands for “statistics that will probably sit in somebody’s desk for years rather than being utilized to either inform policy or to shape future funding rounds”.

Cascading information on how data gathered is used is likely to motivate greater compliance with data collection. One philanthropic funder saw this very much as a critical part of the relationship with grantees:

> The more information we ask our grantees for, the more they expect from us, the more they expect that information to be used and fed back to them. [However] it’s something we struggle with in terms of the sheer volume of information that comes into our organisation.

The same funder was critical that such feedback rarely came from Government sources:

> We never hear back on what the impact of our input has actually been, what the outcomes of the information that have been provided actually are and what we find is lots of information flow, but very little assessment or outcome in terms of what the benefit of all that was.

The learner, of course, is ultimately the source of all this data, but how much feedback do they receive on how it is used? Knowing how their efforts will assist their provider in improving future provision may help their motivation to engage with all the forms, questionnaires, etc. with which they are presented. This was not an area that was proactively explored with either learners or providers, and did not arise of its own accord in any of the focus groups.

LONGITUDINAL MEASUREMENT AND TRACKING

FE colleges and some larger VCSE providers have information management systems that allow the collation of learner records of achievement and the tracking of progression, such as six-month follow-up surveys or interviews. Tracking progression is funder dependent and seems exclusively used for formal provision. While other VCSE organisations often expressed a desire to engage in longitudinal measurement, the reality of limited resources usually precludes this:

> We can only measure this when a learner progresses with X (for instance, from an unaccredited course to a Level 1 course, or from a Level 1 course to Level 2), but if the learner leaves X we simply don't have the staff time to do follow-ups.

As indicated in Figure 3 below, which features responses from only VCSE organisations, more than half are unable to undertake any kind of longitudinal data collection.

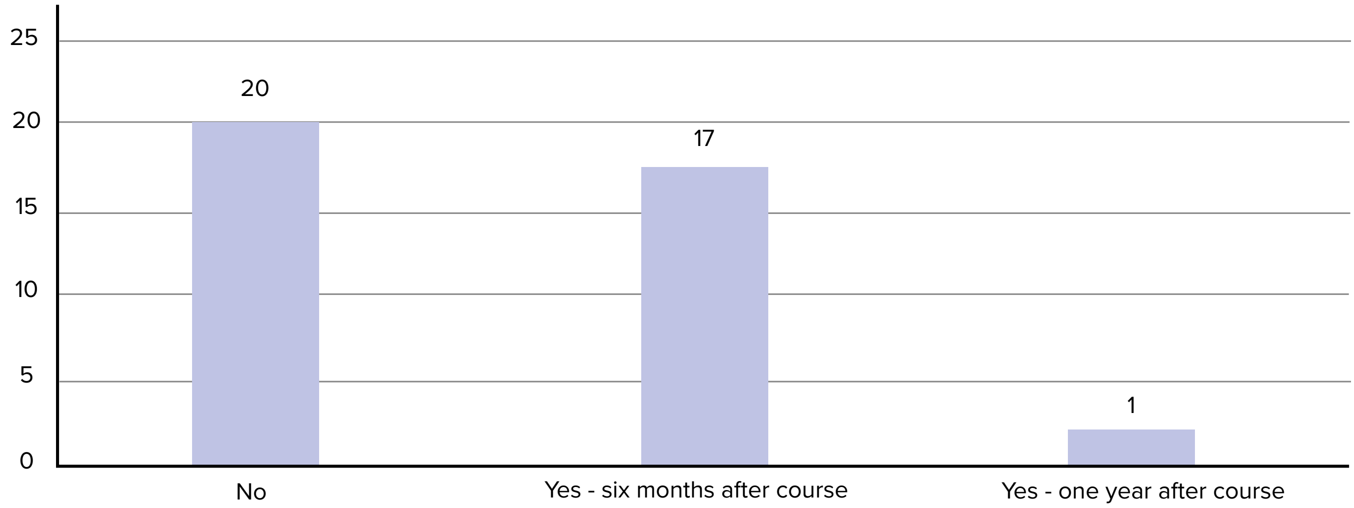


Figure 3. VCSE provider responses to the question "Do you currently collect data on learner progression (i.e. to employment or further learning)?"

While the FE colleges can track progression of learners from their own non-formal provision into formal, capturing information on progression from VCSE provision into FE provision is not currently a mandatory part of FE enrolment. This would provide quantifiable evidence of the impact VCSE provision has on progression into formal FE provision.

The core indicators for longitudinal surveys, for both FE and VCSE organisations, are learning advancement and progression into employment. Funders expressed contrasting views on the value of longitudinal measurement. DfE clearly see value in at least six-monthly follow-up with FE learners, and this is a long-standing commitment. One philanthropic funder supported the idea of longer-term measurement of impact, indeed perhaps going much further than six months:

> What we find is that a lot of impact is measured over the lifetime of a grant, when actually a lot of impact occurs within the years, if not decades, that go beyond that as well. As an organisation we're looking at how we can have a longer view on impact, while also limiting the impact again on the organisations that we fund, so we're not making things overwhelming for them.

In contrast, another philanthropic funder was skeptical of the value of conducting longitudinal measurement given that the learner will have been subject to many impactful events and influences beyond the course they attended:

> This thing of tracking somebody who's engaged in adult learning opportunities down the road to evaluate[its impact]. The reality is you're chasing a pipe dream, because you can't get how the person's experiences evolved, their opportunities and what they've engaged in [since].

Given that conducting longitudinal measurement is resource intensive, funders need to support organisations to carry this out themselves or to engage external agencies. Cost effectiveness is also a factor to consider given the difficulties in achieving significant returns from course participants – a Government funder said, “We consider anything above 10 to 20 percent as a decent response rate, which I know isn’t great.”

Unique Learner Numbers and A Central Database

From the age of 14, learners in Northern Ireland are allocated a Unique Learner Number (ULN) – a common unique identifier used across the education sector throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It currently allows regulated qualifications to be recorded, stored and accessed, and certain bodies in Northern Ireland – including schools, FE colleges and Awarding Organisations – are able to interface with the system to allocate, assess, share and verify learner records.

ULNs have been operational in FE colleges in Northern Ireland since 2011/2012. From 2018 onwards they were a requirement for those delivering European Social Fund (ESF) programmes and so came further into the operating sphere of some VCSE providers. ULNs are not currently used to record non-formal learning.

Feedback from this research suggested that the intention had been for ULNs to provide a mechanism whereby learner journeys could be recorded and tracked, with information available to providers and learners themselves, but that the system is not currently operating according to its full potential:

> I remember when ULNs were first introduced and all the lofty expectations that sat there at the time, that this was going to empower learners and it was going to create a system where you could track people’s journeys throughout […] but it became more about restricting and controlling access to provisions rather than necessarily enabling people.
> (VCSE Provider)

> [It] binds us into that notion of linear learning and people always having to move up a level or always having to do something that builds on what […] went before. Whereas actually people’s life journeys often are not as straightforward as that.
> (VCSE Provider)

> I think they’re used [as] more of an audit tool to make sure that people aren’t getting the same opportunities twice.
> (VCSE Provider)

The concept of a central database to contain full lifelong records of learning (whether or not using the ULNs as they currently operate) was one that received mixed responses in this research. Some providers put forward arguments similar to those associated with the ideals of the ULN system, perhaps even increasing the involvement and role of learners themselves (inputting via apps, for instance):

> So even having some sort of system that could track progress [...] If DfE could create something like that it would be really beneficial to see a participant's journey. Because that's a manageable thing to do if it's an online system.
> (FE provider)

The argument was made that this could assist with longitudinal tracking, and that the system might generate data on learners' journeys from the VCSE sector to FE provision.

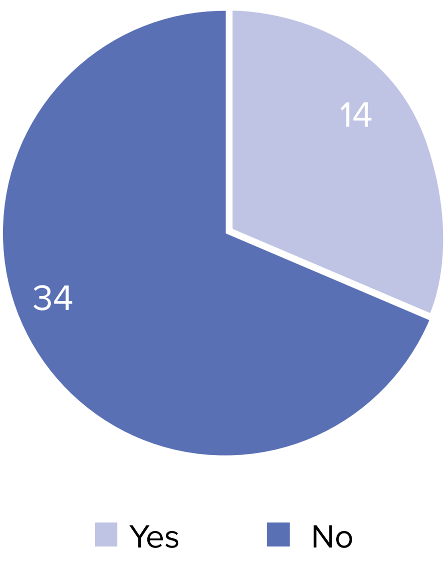
Arguments against a central database capturing information from all providers and covering all learning include feasibility, value for money, concerns about how data on VCSE performance might be used by Government, and whether it would be capable of recording and analysing the distance travelled data so central to non-formal learning. As one VCSE provider commented:

> I have no idea how anything like that could possibly work, to be honest with you. I think everybody's requirements are varied and to try and develop one system, unless it had the capacity to be customised to different agencies, programmes, levels, it would just become [...] of no value, or so unwieldy that it would negate the benefit of doing it.

ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

The indices requested vary from funder to funder and can often also differ from programme to programme even from a single funder. This leads to various complications and costs, most notably that resources are stretched – by far the most common barrier to effective impact measurement emerging from the survey was a lack of time.

Time challenges were identified by 14 organisations in response to the question "What are the barriers you face (if any) to collecting this data?" Smaller organisations particularly struggle, having fewer staff or being purely volunteer-led and often unable to purchase necessary research tools and supportive software. As indicated in Figure 4 below, only 29% (n=14) of all providers, both VCSE and FE, responding to the survey indicated that their funding included dedicated staff time for impact data collection or analysis.



Notably, when results were filtered and reviewed separately, 75% of VCSE organisations (n=33) answered "No". For FE colleges, more resources in this area were apparent, with only 25% (n=1) indicating that they did not have dedicated staff time for impact data collection or analysis.

Figure 4. Responses to the question "Does your funding include dedicated staff time for impact data collection or analysis?"

While smaller VCSE organisations in particular were struggling in this area, even larger organisations can be stretched by another commonly identified challenge – lack of proportionality:

> We recently secured what I would consider to be a small grant of just under £5,000 to support the delivery of a training programme, and the level of bureaucracy associated with that was the same as if it was a £20,000 or £30,000 grant from the same funder.
> (Large VCSE Provider)

Funders are aware of the demands they place on providers and individually they often aim to be supportive:

> We're trying to limit the impact on our grantees, not increase it – trying to make sure that every question, all the information we're gathering is meaningful and has a purpose within our organisation and not just asking for the sake of doing it."
> (Philanthropic Funder)
>
> We would constantly use the colleges to deliver (data collection) and we're asking the same people all the time and there just comes a point where saturation is reached and that is something that certainly does need addressing.
> (Government Funder)

However, minimizing data requests is not always easy to achieve. A local government representative spoke of the challenge councils have as they can be acting as intermediary funders:

> In terms of what we do as Council officers [...] we're all very much of the opinion to try to address the burden of bureaucracy that [we] have talked about for so many years, yet we're finding ourselves making it more and more bureaucratic because we have to meet so many indicator sets from people who need evidence of that.
>
> I just got something from Dept X and there are 18 pages of outcome measures. We wrote back saying basically nobody's going to get all these indicators, can we pick the two or three that would match with us and we can work with the groups? [They answered:] No, you have to try.

While VCSE organisations might be encouraged to hear that individual funders are often sympathetic, standalone actions will not necessarily lessen workloads, since all VCSE organisations are reliant on multiple funding streams and it is the cumulative demands which overburden resources.

In terms of what is requested by funders, there are core questions which should always be asked. **Why is the data needed? What and how much data is needed? What and how much more would be desirable?** These questions need to be tempered by how much is possible given existing resources and/or whether further resources can be made available. Given the pattern of multiple funders required by all VCSE providers, conversations around these questions need to happen across funders and sectors, ideally including providers, otherwise piecemeal improvements will not sufficiently lessen the existing heavy workload.

04 HOW IS IMPACT MEASURED?

VCSE and FE providers use a variety of tools for the measurement of the impact of their provision. There is some variation between formal and non-formal provision, but often the same tools are being used, or there is a methodology which embraces both. Almost all providers report using more than one tool/approach, some through choice and some due to funder requirements. A brief description of the main tools identified by stakeholders in this research is provided in this section of the report, including stakeholder reflections on these tools. Further discussion on how some key tools are being used in practice can be found in the Appendix. Tools used to capture impact at organisational level and learner level are approached separately, though the two are naturally interconnected and were often discussed in tandem.

Engaging a variety of tools is complex to manage for the organisation, producing varied data, with the learner experience of impact measurement varying from one course to another:

> Nothing's uniform because of the different funders. So I think if it wasn't for all the funders we would be sitting down as a team and saying, which one is best, what will we work with and stay with, rather than each programme doing different ones because of the funder.
> (VCSE Provider)

Figure 5 below highlights a range of tools commonly used by providers to support impact capture.[2] Providers responding to the survey could select all tools that applied to their organisation. The use of "in-house" tools was identified by VCSE providers in the initial focus group and added as a category to the survey following this discussion. When asked for further follow-up detail on how in-house tools were being used, a number of providers indicated that their in-house tool was an end-of-course questionnaire.

[2]Only tools that were identified by more than three organisations have been included. A number of other tools were also identified including: Logic Chain Model (n=3), Community Development Outcomes Framework (n=2), WEMWBS (n=1).

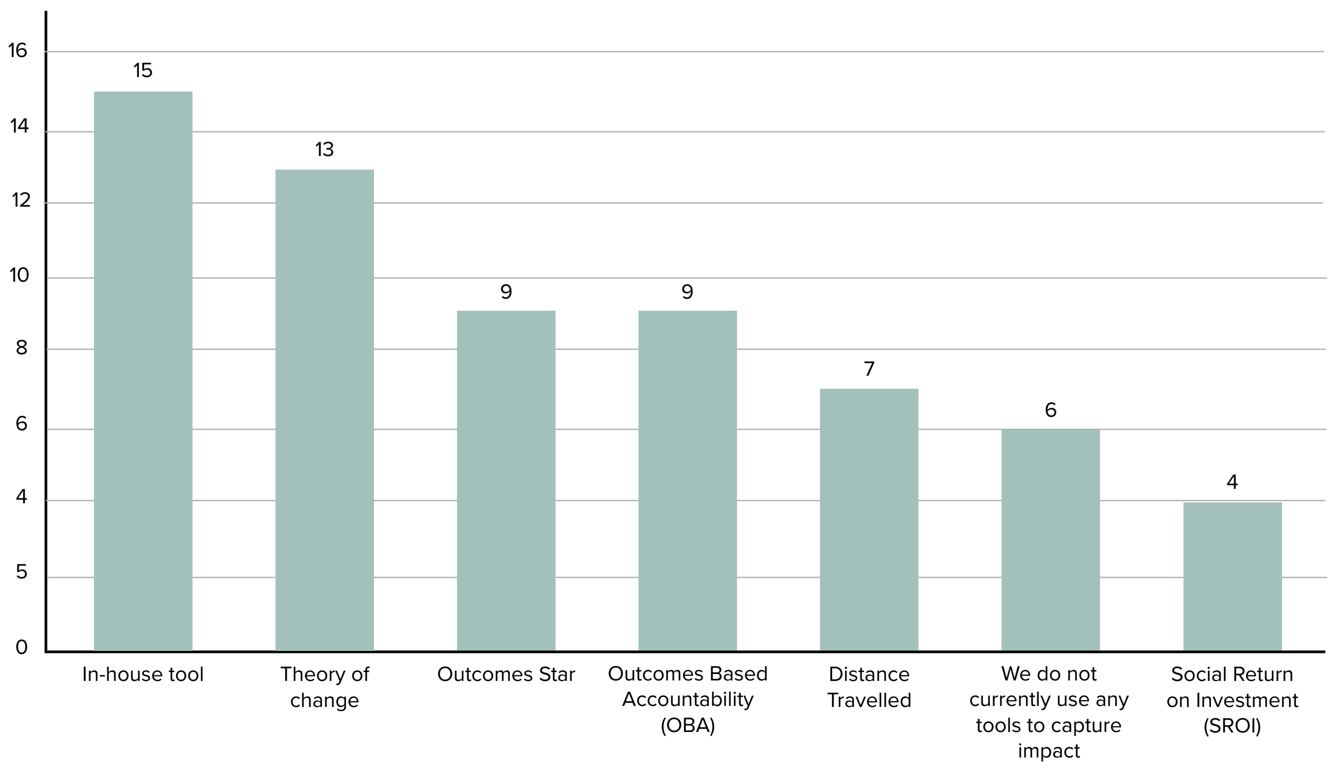


Figure 5. Responses to the question "Does your organisation use any of the following models to capture and evaluate impact? (Please select all that apply)"

AT ORGANISATIONAL OR PROGRAMME LEVEL

Theory of Change

Roughly a quarter of respondents indicated that their impact practice was influenced by the Theory of Change. The Theory of Change is a framework that helps visualise how a series of activities will lead to a desired outcome. Having defined desired outcomes, the next steps are to identify actions required and indices to evidence success. As well as assisting an organisation in strategic or programme planning, the process helps in the design of appropriate evaluation, at least in terms of indices to be used.

Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA)

Key features of the OBA approach include working backwards from a set of desired outcomes, the identification of indices and then performance measurement, asking questions such as What did we do? (a record, usually quantitative, on activities undertaken), How well did we do it? (reflection on performance, with evidence) and What difference did we make? (impacts achieved using indices). While for many OBA is quite new, the model has been used for some years by various organisations, including in the VCSE sector. Training in OBA is available locally from the National Children's Bureau.

OBA had been adopted by the NI Executive as the methodology for evaluating its 2016 draft Programme for Government (though not the recently published PfG), and so in recent years it has been filtering down through the Government structures to both statutory and VCSE providers in receipt of Government funding.

As this approach, introduced through Government, is relatively recent, even those administering funds need to learn more:

> We have sourced Outcomes Based Accountability training recently and struggled to get that. I think people are leaning towards it, but I'm not sure that the skill in it is completely there.
> (Health Trust)

Just under a quarter of survey respondents indicated that they are now using OBA for at least part of their provision, as it rolls out through Government departments, agencies and local government. At least some seem to be receiving support in its implementation:

> We have inbuilt evaluation into that and it is an outcomes-based accountability. So we have been able to bring someone in to do that specifically for us and work with stakeholders to design it at the outset so that we have a robust evaluation at the end.
> (Health Trust)

Since OBA is used for health programmes supported through Trusts, the impact of some non-formal provision will be currently captured through this method. A limitation of OBA, highlighted by one VCSE practitioner, is that as a stand-alone record it emphasises numerical results and therefore does not capture learner experiences. Organisations report supplementing it with case studies and learner stories.

Social Return on Investment (SROI)

SROI is a way to measure the value of an organisation's activities beyond traditional financial metrics. SROI assigns monetary values to social, environmental and economic outcomes. It then compares these monetised benefits to the costs of an activity and the result is expressed as a return on investment ratio. So, for example, an SROI ratio of 3:1 means that for every £1 invested, £3 of social value has been created. SROI is seen as a very powerful impact measurement tool as it generates results that resonate with economists and auditors. It should not, however, be simply seen as a reductive process that emphasises value for money, as the reports generated are much more comprehensive and inclusive of many stakeholders' experiences, as can be seen in the example given in the Appendix.

Only one in eight of survey respondents (including two colleges) reported using SROI. This may be because of the financial costs involved.

AT LEARNER LEVEL

In Person Methods

Almost two-thirds of survey respondents indicated that they chose personal interaction with learners to elicit impact measurement, through focus groups and/or learner interviews. This was appreciated by learners:

> The discussion groups, I think, are probably one of the best ways to reflect.

Such interactions can allow more expansive feedback than other methods such as surveys and evaluation forms, and are highly effective in gathering qualitative data and identifying possible case studies. One provider described how their organisation encourages this capture on an on-going basis:

> It's our tutors that capture that (the real story). They hear day after day students stating things about their confidence, about how they feel now. So we now ask the tutors to record that so that we have a full picture.

The benefit of these approaches can be a sense of empowerment for the learners in the impact measurement process, but this does come at a resource cost for the providers.

Feedback Forms

Most providers use written end-of-course evaluation forms which vary from organisation to organisation and often from course to course, depending on the information to be captured for particular funders. These are often referred to as "happy sheets", as it is acknowledged that learners at that point tend to be of a particularly positive frame of mind regarding their learning experience and this is likely to influence their feedback and scoring. This method might be the sole measurement tool used, or may be supplemented by focus groups or interviews. Questions can include some assessment of distance travelled, but lack a baseline against which to measure progression.

Surveys

Learner surveys are standard practice in FE provision, but half of VCSE providers also reported their use. The main focus of these surveys – most often undertaken electronically for ease of dissemination and collation and to minimise resource costs – is on progression into further learning or employment. The VCSE providers which report using surveys tend to be those running programmes (usually Government funded) that have an emphasis on employability and where longitudinal follow-up is a requirement of the contract. It is unclear from the data gathered for this research if the impact of any non-formal provision is captured via surveys.

Distance Travelled

Methodologies that enable the measurement of distance travelled across different "soft skills" are commonly used by both FE and VCSE providers for both non-formal and formal provision.

Most commonly, this comprises of entry and exit assessment forms, where a baseline for each learner is established and then re-visited at the completion of the course or programme. Questions will include a variety of indices linked to "soft skills." The forms are sometimes completed with the assistance of a tutor or mentor. This approach received very positive feedback from learners:

> So if there was a question, what do you know about X and then again at the end, so that you're able to actually see the difference in-between, you know what you knew going in at the start, which is probably nothing, and what you're coming away with. Because even if it's not a certificate, it's a self-achievement to see what you've learned.
>
> I did a tick-box of where you were in this aspect of the course and then at the end and then compare [...] It is amazing because you do not realise how far you've come on, or what information you've learned, or what skills you've learned, until it's sitting there in black and white and it's all your own – before and after. Yeah, so it's not an evaluation from anybody else. So, yeah, I find it very positive.

The one criticism from learners was not always receiving a record to take away:

> I do like the checking to see where you are at the start and then to see where you are at the end. The only thing I'd say is to be able to actually look back on it [...] because I know some courses you'll fill it in and then you'll hand it over and you don't see it again. Whereas if you actually had them then you could look back and reflect.

While learners said that they experienced distance travelled primarily in courses relating to mental health, they recommended that this should be a standard procedure across all courses because of its value to them. An example of how the basic distance travelled measurement is used in the VSCE sector can be seen in the Appendix.

The Step Up programme, which was launched in April 2023, is currently the main vehicle for non-formal learning in FE colleges. In addition to entry and exit assessment, it also assesses at the mid point. Assessment is supported by dedicated staff who act as mentors/coaches to the learners on a one-to-one basis, assisting them in the completion of the paperwork involved. This is leading to greater recording of impact for non-accredited courses than would have been common practice in the past:

> I think we do need to refine our own data capture [...] [with] Step Up there's no question of that it has to be recorded. So it's been good [...] it'll put us in a bit of best practice in that sense going forward. But no, we wouldn't have recorded that much [previously]. We would have seen anecdotally examples of people and we would have used them for the marketing team where they would have progressed on from doing a non-accredited [course] and went on to accredited provision. (FE College)

This highly supportive, but also highly resource intensive, model of supporting the learner to identify and move towards their goals and measure achievement, is also benefitting the colleges in their own impact assessment:

> They would have three different reviews and we use the student reviews to map the student journey. We're very much interested in the journey of the student. So how were they feeling when they first came in? What were their barriers? What was overcome? What has worked for them? Where are they now going to and what opportunities do they have in terms of progression? Now that helps us not just to support them and morally and ethically make sure that they can either progress or are supported and looked after the programme, but also did we achieve our outcomes [...] what did we actually achieve or what did the programme do? (FE College)

A commonly used tool for distance travelled assessment is the Outcomes Star. This is a highly adaptable tool that can be tailored to measure different outcomes/impacts. As a visual tool requiring no written responses, it can be particularly appropriate where learners lack confidence and writing skills. Each point of the star represents a specific ability or attribute (e.g. confidence, communication skills) and has a scale of usually 1-5. The learner (sometimes assisted by a tutor or mentor) marks the star at the start of a course or programme and then returns to it at the end to judge where they would then place themselves on the scale/s. The learner can go away with a visual record of their progress. Staff need to make a separate record of progress to enable collation across the learner cohort.

Stars may be customised by providers or prescribed by funders. As one provider noted:

> If we get money from the [funder], we'll use the Outcomes Star and it's their Star that we're using, not our own.

An example of the use of the Outcomes Star can be seen in the Appendix.

Another distance travelled tool that was favoured by ESF-funded projects in the past was the Rikter Scale, where learners indicated scores by moving sliders on a customisable board (again usually with a mentor), at the start and end of their course. Again, this was seen as more user friendly than forms for situations where learners' literacy and confidence levels were lower. Unlike the Outcomes Star, however, the learner did not have a record that they could take away. There was no mention of the Rikter Scale in responses to the survey for this report.

Case Studies/Learner Stories

Providers across the VCSE and FE sectors all report the importance of collecting and sharing learner stories and promote these in reports to funders whenever they can. Stories bring the voice of the learner authentically into impact measurement, especially when the learner themselves tells their story on paper or in person. Through the story, the holistic, human experience of learning can best be captured. As one VCSE provider noted:

> Using stories from learners does show funders the impact of those soft outcomes and in a more substantial way than just the numbers

Philanthropic funders also placed a premium on hearing the learner voice:

> Our trustees know it's not all about the numbers. So they're more interested in the personal stories and the learning that we get out of it.

While provider experiences show that for some funders the stories are seen just as colourful additions to reporting, rather than as core evidence, there seems to be a wind of change:

> Whenever [the Education and Training Inspectorate] came in, they were very interested in the learner journey and the personal stories. I do think the narrative around that is starting to change. You know, even the way that they're looking at auditing and inspecting is starting to change.
> (FE College)

Learner stories can now be found on most providers' websites and social media, as they recognise the power of personal experiences in selling the benefits of learning in ways that are relatable and more engaging than "hard" data. As one local Government funder noted:

> It's just important to always remember the qualitative data and the stories and actually sell the value to providers and funders around capturing that data, because it can be more than just a tool for measuring impact, it can sell the value of the service, it can connect with new audiences if it's captured on a video or a different setting, or a video output on social media. Whatever it might be, it has lots of benefits. It can tell a lot more about the impact than just some text numbers.

A few VCSE providers also evidence the motivational power of learner stories on their staff and organisations:

> I think it's very important that staff in an organisation see that journey of their students. So whether funders are asking for it or not, it is very, very important [...] It gives us motivation to continue to do what we're doing, because you see the impact that you have, that the programmes have on individual people and their families and their lives.

Written Versus Electronic Approaches to Data Capture

For the majority of providers, impact measurement is paper based, whether it be in the form of questionnaires or visual tools such as the Outcomes Star. However, some measurement is now carried out electronically (in particular the longitudinal questionnaires). There are positives and negatives associated with both.

Paper-based collection is perhaps the most familiar to learners; it is their expectation and in some instances provides them with something to take away and keep as a record. However, and depending perhaps on the user-friendliness of the assessment's design, some learners can find being handed a form daunting. One learner who took part in a focus group commented, "having a piece of paper in front of you and you have to write something down, like my brain goes blank."

For the provider, paper-based collection requires additional staff time to input the data into their databases or management information systems. Sending out forms via emails and/or using tools such as QR codes and SurveyMonkey can reduce the administrative burden, including the collation of data. However, there are some disadvantages. Being more distant from the time and place of the learning, learners can be less motivated to respond and the method requires accurate contact records – hence the return rate can be low. While this is probably diminishing, there are still learners who will not be comfortable with electronic options.

Independent Versus Supported Assessment

Regardless of methodology or the tool employed, the assessment of impact in terms of "soft skills" gained or increased is subjective, based on the individual learner's self-reflection. It can also be impacted by how questions are worded, the learner's understanding of the questions and the responses sought as well as the purpose of the exercise. One provider told of a learner who scored all questions "10" because they thought it was part of their assessment on the course.

Some argue that when the learner has an opportunity to interact with a peer or a tutor/mentor during the completion of the impact measurement tool, then they are more likely to arrive at a fair score for their achievements. Having the resources of time and possibly staff to provide such support probably limits its practice.

05 A WAY FORWARD

The survey and the other data collection methods used in this research all asked participants for their ideas around improving impact measurement.

As elsewhere, responses frequently went beyond a focus on non-formal provision, as for providers impact measurement is viewed and often practised holistically. There was significant confluence in identifying the areas where improvement could/should focus, including sometimes across sectoral providers (i.e. VCSE providers and FE colleges).

Greater recognition for qualitative outcomes

Frustration remains that many funders, particularly central and local government, still place the emphasis on quantitative data, especially when it comes to formal provision:

> Our funders don't care about stuff like that. They want to see how many bums are on seats and what side of the fence those bums come from, as opposed to actually the work that we are doing [...] which is affecting in a positive way the opinions and the experience of our learners.
> (VCSE Provider)

Providers, where possible, will capture wider data because they recognise its value to their organisations and to the learners, but want funders to universally acknowledge that value also and support its collection.

Collaboration and consistency

All VCSE providers report the necessity of having multiple funders, but in terms of impact measurement that comes with a price, as reporting requires capturing different data depending on individual programmes, which multiplies the administrative load. It also makes organisational-wide reporting more difficult as well as any pan-sector analysis. Having core, agreed indices for qualitative impact measurement would lead to a significant improvement. This would require collaboration across funders and also consultation with providers – ideally co-design.

Collaboration, however, is challenging. The Census report identified 50 unique funders (p. 47) for providers in the VCSE sector, a mix of Government and philanthropic agencies. The challenge of arriving at agreement across all these bodies is daunting. There exists a Funders' Forum which facilitates discussion across its non-government members and which has sought to address issues of impact measurement, but even there, with existing relationships in place, there are challenges at a micro level. As one philanthropic funder, a member of the Forum, described:

> Funder X and myself decided to come together because we were both funding the same project with different evaluations. So we decided to [...] try and streamline our question, even if they do have to complete it twice. If we're asking the same questions, it's easy to cut and paste. And it was extremely difficult [in practice].

The discussion would become even more complex if extended to include Government departments.

> What's great is that the statutory [funders] aren't involved in our Funders' Forum - it's just the independents - because that would just add a whole other dimension of scrutiny that we don't really have to have.
> (Philanthropic Funder)

The complexity need not, however, negate the value of greater exploration between funders and across sectors.

A set of guidelines for funders could be developed to help achieve consistency in the sector, e.g. how much data is needed in proportion to funding allocated and indicating standard questions. This might aid in the process of co-design.

Flexibility

While providers desire greater consistency of ask from funders, that does not necessarily equate to wanting to adopt fewer measurement methodologies or tools. Almost all providers report using a variety of approaches and see value in doing so, particularly to ensure that qualitative data capturing the learner voice and experience is effectively collected and communicated. There is also the need to have the flexibility to choose approaches that work best given the variability of subject matter and learner cohort. As highlighted by one FE provider:

> I feel your impact or your evaluation framework, whatever that may be, has to be flexible for the level of learner and the programme that you're doing.

While a number of funders already negotiate with their grantees in terms of tools and approaches (indeed some leave decisions on impact measurement wholly in the hands of the provider), providers would appreciate wider practice of co-design in this area, with a recognition that they can have greater insight and experience into learning delivery than the funder.

Proportionality

A further issue for providers is a lack of proportionality in terms of the demands of data collection and management against the funds provided. As one VCSE provider in receipt of central and local government funding explained:

> [From Funder X] we receive about £100,000 [and there is] less in-depth monitoring required, compared to a £5,000 grant from [Funder Y].

A lack of proportionality is not universal amongst funders, but remains a common experience for providers.

Increased qualitative data capture in formal learning

Even where it is not a funding requirement, many VCSE providers incorporate some qualitative impact measurement when delivering formal learning programmes. This may be forwarded to the funder, but would primarily inform internal quality assessment. VCSE providers run a significant number of accredited courses at Levels 1 and 2, and learners sometimes return to learning via accredited courses rather than always re-entering via non-formal provision. Providers recognise that these learners require equal support and that the rewards of incorporating distance travelled measurement can make a real difference in increasing the likelihood of committing to further learning.

Within FE provision there tends to be much less emphasis on the qualitative side of impact measurement, once a student enters formal provision where the primary determinant of success is the achievement of a qualification. There was acknowledgement that for students on lower qualification levels (1-3) there would be advantages in supporting the measurement of distance travelled alongside gaining an accreditation, but that could come with a cost:

> I think it would be worthwhile. You can look at current practice, yes, but I think there's no easy way to do it. It would be resource intensive. There are things around student journals that could potentially be used [...] or online student portals where students would do some self-reflection on their journey. So, you could utilise existing technologies and existing mechanisms, things that are currently there without having to invest additional resource, albeit that it would be a wee bit more work and nobody likes to have more to do."
> (FE college)

Capturing progression

Almost all participants saw value in further investment in longitudinal measurement:

> The majority of the grants you're giving out is one year. How can you tell the impact when they're only coming to an end and the fact is you really can't.
> (Philanthropic Funder)

However, in practice such measurement tends to focus primarily on retention in learning and/or movement into employment, and as such does not specifically measure "soft skills" such as confidence or mental health. Furthermore, any increase in the inclusion of the latter comes with a caveat that changes from the point of exiting a course cannot necessarily be attributed solely to that course, as the individual will have been subject to many other influencing factors since, but this is the case with any longitudinal measurement.

A long-standing frustration from VCSE learning providers is the lack of acknowledgement of their role in preparing learners to enter FE provision. It was suggested that data could be captured at FE enrolment:

> Even something like: "have you in the past two to three years attended a course in a community setting?" Something as simple as that, "yes" or "no"?
> (VCSE Provider)

This data could then be centrally collated and the impact of community provision receive due recognition.

Closing feedback loops

In most instances the flow of information on impact reporting is experienced as a one-way system and feedback is rare. Providers are generally dissatisfied with the level of feedback from funders as to the impact the data and reports they provide are making on policy, practice, programme design or funding priorities. This is a disincentivising factor and is something to be considered if any increased levels of impact measurement and reporting are to be introduced.

> I don't mind putting part of my working week towards that, if I had the feeling it was gone somewhere or somebody even was reading it [...] That's not the case. That's definitely not the case.
> (VCSE Provider)

Some learners spoke about how empowering they found it when they could see that their provider had listened to their feedback, but that is not to say that learners universally see how the information they provide is being used.

Further information/training

There is a very high level of enthusiasm for impact measurement generally, and most providers were eager to improve their practice, both for their learners and to extend the capture of the wider impacts into families and communities. As indicated in the survey, 35% (n=15) of providers feel that their current approach to impact does not adequately capture the benefits to learners, while 60% (n=24) indicated that they feel their current approach does not adequately capture the benefits of learning beyond the individual learner (i.e. to families or communities). While these benefits are observed by providers on a daily basis, they may not currently have the capacity or training to evidence them.

Not all VCSE providers were aware of the opportunities for peer support that already exist, such as the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action's (NICVA's) quarterly Impact Practice Network. Some further training opportunities would be welcome.

> I think it's interesting to hear how other people or other organisations do it and if there's new and better ways of doing things.
> (VCSE Provider)

> I'm sure that there's different tools and I'd be really interested to learn more about what kind of tools, how would you do it in a way that provides impact measurement, that's not onerous, either to organise or to get participants involved in.
> (VCSE Provider)

Increased resources

Willingness to improve or expand impact measurement is countered by resource limitations. Impact measurement, particularly for non-formal provision, is very resource intensive. In the survey results, a lack of time was by far the most frequently identified barrier to collecting the data – and this is across both VCSE and FE sectors:

> I know our frontline admissions teams and even our MS and data teams are absolutely flat to the mat. And what we are asked to churn out in terms of data and reports at that level is unbelievable.
> (FE College)

Other barriers identified include lack of appropriate software and skilled staff:

> We have the administration processes to capture that feedback. Every student is asked to fill in a feedback form. So we have that there, but to analyse that information and to do the in-depth work that is necessary in order to properly write that down, I have nobody who can do that.
> (VCSE Provider)

As well as the general staffing costs, the use of impact measurement tools such as the Outcomes Star or SROI come at a price, both to purchase the packages and to train staff in their use. Any promotion of the use of these tools must bear in mind that they remain out of reach for many providers, particularly those run on a voluntary basis.

The VCSE sector is more insecure than it has been for years, and FE colleges are subject to increased budgetary constraints, so the desire for improvement of impact measurement must be weighed in that context. The primary challenges identified with respect to resources relate to, on the one hand, increasing funding and capacity for data capture and impact measurement among providers, and, on the other, ensuring proportionality and consistency of approach or ask on the part of funders. Solutions are more likely to be identified and sustainable if the different stakeholders can work together. Collaboration is itself costly, but currently the costs of the lack of collaboration are very evident.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Collaboration across funders:

It is clear that impact measurement is a live issue amongst funders, however there is a danger that without improved collaboration developments could continue to diverge. The Funders' Forum already provides a vehicle for collaboration across philanthropic funders. Several Government departments fund adult learning but it is unclear what level of collaboration takes place. DfE commissioned this research, and the Minister for the Economy aims to create a culture of lifelong learning in Northern Ireland and to increase rates of participation in adult learning here. However, while DfE is the lead Department, responsibility for adult learning is cross-cutting and there is scope for better cross-government collaboration.

The research indicates that stakeholders broadly seek to achieve consistency and proportionality in impact measurement, including aligning the volume of data requested with funding allocated and providers' research capacity. Critical discussion is needed around how to alleviate the strained resources of both VCSE and FE providers by rationalising and streamlining demands for data and reporting.

Close feedback loops:

All funders should improve communication with their funded providers, particularly in terms of offering feedback on how the data collected has been used. This would build stronger and more trusting relationships.

Wider practice of co-design:

Funders and providers should work together on improvements to impact measurement. Areas where co-design would prove valuable include the identification of essential indices for non-formal learning, and the potential inclusion of these indices (and appropriate measurement tools) into formal provision at NQF or RQF Entry Level and Levels 1 to 3 across both VSCE and FE sectors, and the capture of wider family and community impacts.

Measuring the impact of VSCE provision:

DfE and FE colleges should explore how learner participation in the VCSE sector could be routinely captured during college enrolment. This would enable the measurement of the VCSE sector's contribution in terms of progression of learners into FE provision.

Impact measurement capacity:

Providers appreciate flexibility in the choice of impact measurement approaches, methods, and tools. However, funders must address the costs associated with providers' impact measurement capacity, including staff time and training as well as relevant tools.

Training and peer support:

VCSE learning providers would welcome opportunities to learn more about impact measurement methodologies and tools and support one another in improving practice. NICVA's Impact Practice Network offers quarterly opportunities for the exploration of impact measurement across the whole VSCE sector. Consideration could be given to resourcing a specific focus on VCSE learning providers.

Further research:

This research constitutes an initial scoping of current approaches to and challenges around the impact measurement process for adult education. It has set in motion some necessary conversations, but it has also uncovered a need for further research in areas such as capturing the benefits that (non-formal) adult education has for employers and learning in the workplace.

Learner voice:

As can be seen in this report, learner experiences offer valuable insight into the effectiveness of impact measurement. Currently there is no collective space for the adult learner voice. A learner forum would provide a vehicle for consulting with the key beneficiaries of learning provision and build learners' capacity to amplify the impact of their learning. By way of example, see the work of AONTAS in promoting learner voice through the National FET Learner Forum and associated learner voice capacity building.

APPENDIX

This Appendix offers case studies/examples of tools used by three VCSE organisations providing adult education in Northern Ireland. For each organisation, a member of staff involved in the impact process provides a description of a key tool (or tools) used, and offers reflection on how the tool supports their work, including benefits and limitations.

NOW Group

Social Return on Investment (SROI)

NOW Group has been using SROI to measure the impact of its services for around 15 years. The rationale for introducing SROI to the company was based on the vision of the CEO and Board who wanted to see NOW Group make a real difference in the lives of young people and adults with learning disabilities and autism by supporting them into 'real' jobs with a future. The idea of measuring the impact that our services had on the lives of our participants, their families and wider society was viewed as being paramount and much more valuable than merely recording numbers of courses completed or placements secured.

According to the SROI network, "SROI measures change in ways that are relevant to the people or organisations that experience or contribute to it. It tells the story of how change is being created by measuring social, environmental and economic outcomes and uses monetary values to represent them. This enables a ratio of benefits to costs to be calculated. For example, a ratio of 3:1 indicates that an investment of £1 delivers £3 of social value. (SROI Network, A Guide to Social Return on Investment 2012)."

There are a number of benefits to using SROI. At the macro level in advocacy, fundraising and stakeholder engagement, the most obvious benefit is the financial calculation. For example, NOW Group's current figure of £1:21 demonstrates that for every £1 invested in the company during the financial year there was a £21 return in terms of social value. The figure provides an independent evaluation of the impact of the services on the lives of participants and on the wider society which can resonate with funders and other stakeholders and help an organisation "stand out" by being able to demonstrate the value of their work and the impact beyond the output targets.

However, the figure, while very useful, is only part of the story. The real benefit lies in the process of measuring impact through the theory of change and other models. SROI evaluations are undertaken in six stages and we use an SROI practitioner to undertake the evaluation to ensure it is robust and independent.

1. Establishing scope and identifying stakeholders
2. Mapping outcomes
3. Evidencing the outcomes and giving them a value
4. Establishing impact
5. Calculating the SROI
6. Reporting, using and embedding

Our role is in identifying and engaging the stakeholders in the process and mapping outcomes. Reaching a figure of £1.21 has been a journey of continuous improvement for NOW Group which started with a much smaller ratio of social value against investment. The first stage involves identifying and then verifying the impact we intend to make however the real benefit comes in engaging with stakeholders to give them an opportunity to articulate the impact that services have on them which is often in ways that we would not have anticipated. This is important as the more impact we can identify the stronger the case we can make for the value of the services we provide and this also helps us shape services based on feedback.

We supplement SROI with other tools - we find the Outcomes Star very helpful in measuring participant progression in soft skills and we use this information as evidence in the process. We also use Outcome Based Accountability (OBA) framed around the following questions:

How much did we do?
How well did we do it?
What difference did it make?

Using our jobs figure, the answers in this example are as follows:

We secured 257 new jobs for participants
91% of those jobs were sustained for more than six months
£690,000 was saved in reduced benefit payments and there was over £1.5m in disposable income for the those who secured the jobs.

We also identify and verify softer but equally important impact evidenced through surveys and focus groups e.g.

- 1288 participants experienced improved health and well being
- 1386 participants reported feeling more independent
- 1304 participants felt more socially included
- 1630 parents/carers had reduced anxiety and more respite for self-care
  (these figures refer to the wider participant group)

The joy of the process lies in identifying the unintended impacts that our services provide, and it is often those at the micro level that resonate the most. To continue with the employment example above, a parent of a participant with a learning disability who had secured a paid job highlights the impact on the family level commented:

> Now John can join in on the family conversation around the dinner table in the evenings when his siblings discuss their day at work.

Some other examples:

> NOW continues to reinforce and educate the benefits of healthy eating and lifestyle and endeavors to help with money management. It is a safe place to meet in and develop social skills. It makes my daughter feel less cut off from the outside world while the rest of her family are studying and working. As a result, relationships and dynamics within the family have improved.

> The introduction of JAM to our organisation has improved our service user experience but an unexpected positive consequence was the support it provided to our staff, their families and friends and the wider community.

While there are drawbacks in terms of costs of securing SROI practitioner support, and the time involved in setting up an initial framework for the process and consulting with stakeholders, this can prove a worthwhile investment as once the framework is established it can be built upon for subsequent evaluations. Being able to report a financial value against the return on investment in your organisation should hopefully be profitable.

In terms of measuring the impact of non-formal learning SROI allows us to set the agenda by providing our own measurement when writing applications. A number of years ago alongside other third sector organisations in Northern Ireland, NOW Group was heavily involved in lobbying funders and Government departments in particular to move from output-related targets – which do not always provide the full picture — to impact-related outcomes and it is good to see that progress has been made in this area.

Clanrye Group

In-house Distance Travelled Tool

Clanrye Group deliver the Skills for Life and Work (SfLW) programme specifically for young people aged 16-22 with a learning disability and additional needs. The programme consists of training, qualifications and support interventions to enable participants to move closer to, or into employment, further education or other training. Participants on the programme present with significant needs, including complex and multiple disabilities, with a high percentage presenting with mental health issues.

Overview

The programme reports on qualification and progression outcomes but also values growth in:

soft skills;
transferable skills: and
personal and occupational development.

To accurately measure this the Quality Team and SfLW management team within Clanrye developed a bespoke distance travelled tool. A custom-built PowerApp was created to:

- manage all programme related data;
- track student progress over time; and
- provide structured insights into personal development.

Key Areas of Measurement

The tool assesses three core areas, each containing specific skills, as set out below:

Soft Skills Attitude and motivation Communicate effectively Self-confidence/self-esteem Use of Initiative
Transferable Skills Time-keeping & attendance Ability to follow instructions Work independently Work collaboratively Meet targets and deadlines Make informed decisions
Occupational Skills Personal presentation Readiness for placement Ability to perform tasks Quality of work Potential for employment

Scoring System

Each skill is scored on a scale of 1 to 5:

- 1 – No Development
- 2 – Limited Development
- 3 – Some Development
- 4 – Developed
- 5 – Well Developed

Stages of Development:

- Stage 1 (No Development): Requires substantial support; skills not yet identified
- Stage 2 (Limited Development): Aware of improvements needed but still requires significant support
- Stage 3 (Some Development): Beginning to develop skills with regular planned support
- Stage 4 (Developed): Has core abilities but requires ongoing development
- Stage 5 (Well Developed): Consistently demonstrates ability and knowledge with minimal support

Assessment Timeline

Who Inputs the Scores?

- Tutors
- Skills Development Officers
- Mentors
- Work Placement Providers

These individuals work closely with students and understand their progress.

When Are Scores Input?

- Baseline Assessment (4–6 months after enrolment) Conducted once staff have a clear understanding of the student's abilities and needs
- First Review (Year 2) Assesses progress and identifies areas requiring further development
- Final Review (End of Year 3) Measures overall progress and distance travelled

PowerApp Functionality & Reporting

Automated Data Processing & Insights

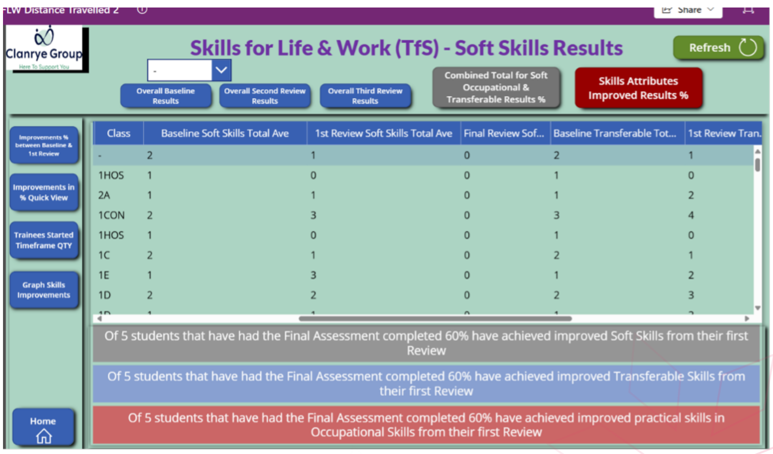
- The PowerApp calculates overall scores and progress for each individual.
- Data is monitored closely by management to track trends and ensure effectiveness.

Reports Generated

- Individual & Group Progress
- Percentage improvements across different skills
- Detailed breakdowns within each skill category
- Identification of students needing additional support for early intervention
  Comprehensive management reports on student development

Screenshot

See below a sample PowerApp screenshot demonstrating the type of data retrieved, providing clear and structured insights.



Outcomes Star

The Outcomes Star is a tool used in health, social care, and education settings to help individuals and service providers measure progress over time. It is designed to support person-centred care and encourage conversations about personal development, well-being, and goal setting.

How It Works

- The Outcomes Star consists of a star-shaped chart with different points representing key areas of life (e.g. housing, relationships, mental health, employment, well-being).
- Individuals rate themselves in these areas based on a five-stage model (from being stuck to self-reliance).
- Practitioners work with them to set goals, track progress, and reflect on improvements over time.

There are a number of different versions of 'Stars' which are tailored to specific groups or projects e.g homelessness star, wellbeing star, recovery star. Organisations choose the most relevant star for their project.

Why Clanrye Group Uses the Well-Being Star Model

Clanrye Group uses the Well-Being Star on its social prescribing project to support individuals in improving their overall well-being. The Outcomes Star model was selected by the lead partner and written into a funding application, ensuring alignment with project goals and funder expectations. This model provides a structured yet flexible approach to assessing and supporting individuals through a holistic lens, addressing various aspects of well-being.

What the Well-Being Star Consists of

The Well-Being Star is a structured assessment tool designed to facilitate meaningful conversations between workers and clients. It consists of eight key areas that contribute to a person's overall well-being:

1. Lifestyle
2. Looking After Yourself
3. Managing Symptoms
4. Work, Volunteering & Other Activities
5. Money
6. Where You Live
7. Family & Friends
8. Feeling Positive

Each of these areas is rated on a five-point scale ranging from "Not Thinking About It" to "As Good As It Can Be". This structured approach allows individuals to self-assess their current situation while also receiving input from their support worker.

The Types of Questions Asked

The Well-Being Star uses a series of reflective and exploratory questions to help individuals assess their strengths and challenges. Some examples of the types of questions include:

- How do you feel about your current lifestyle choices?
- Are you able to manage your health condition effectively?
- Do you have access to financial support when needed?
- How do you feel about your home environment?
- Are you engaged in meaningful activities such as work or volunteering?
- How would you describe your emotional well-being and mindset?

These questions provide a conversational structure that enables clients to explore their circumstances, identify challenges, and develop action plans for improvement.

Paper or Electronic Format

The Well-Being Star can be completed in both paper and electronic formats. Clanrye Group mostly use the paper copy which is completed with the client. This has worked well to date and helps steer the conversation, whilst enabling the completion of an action plan. Scores are then manually uploaded to 'Elemental' (software) which enables the retrieval of reports outlining outcomes and distance travelled. Action Plans can also be scanned and uploaded, but they are not reported on.

Advantages of the Well-Being Star Model

The Well-Being Star offers several benefits, making it a valuable tool in the social prescribing project:

- **Conversational Steer:** It provides a structured yet natural way to discuss key aspects of a client's life, facilitating open and meaningful dialogue.
- **Comprehensive Assessment:** By covering multiple areas of well-being, it offers a holistic view of an individual's situation.
- **Action Plan Development**: The tool supports the creation of tailored action plans that empower clients to take steps toward positive change.
- **Worker Involvement:** It allows support workers to complete assessments collaboratively with clients, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and support.

Limitations of the Well-Being Star Model

Despite its advantages, there are some limitations to the model:

- **Inconsistency in Measurement:** Different clients are assessed over varying time frames, with some measured over 12 weeks and others over six months. This inconsistency can make it difficult to compare progress effectively.
- **Subjectivity in Ratings:** While the five-point scale is useful, clients may interpret ratings differently, leading to potential inconsistencies in scoring.
- **Dependence on Worker Training:** The effectiveness of the model depends on the skill level and training of the support worker, which can vary between practitioners.

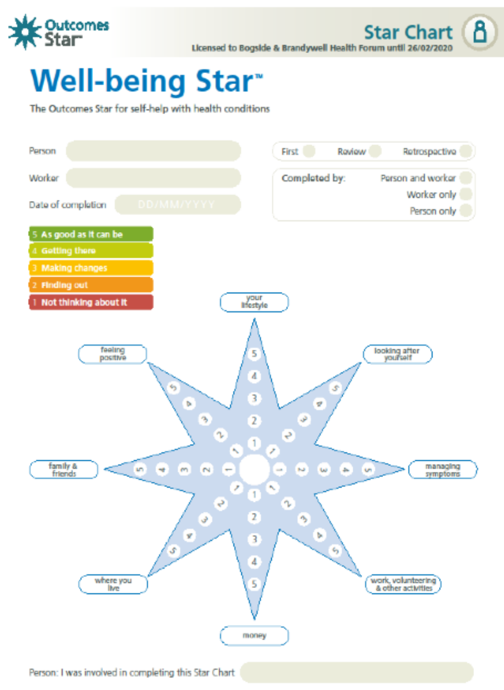
Was This Model a Choice or a Funder Requirement?

The use of the Well-Being Star was not an independent choice made by Clanrye Group but rather a requirement built into the funding application by the lead partner. This means that while Clanrye has successfully integrated the model into its services, its adoption was influenced by external factors rather than an internally driven decision.

Benefits for the Organisation and Learners

For Clanrye Group as an organisation, the Well-Being Star provides a structured method for assessing client progress and demonstrating impact to funders. It also facilitates consistency in service delivery and provides valuable data that can be used for reporting and service improvement.

For learners and clients, the Well-Being Star offers a clear and engaging way to reflect on their well-being, set realistic goals, and track their progress. The tool encourages self-awareness and empowerment, helping individuals to take active steps toward improving their quality of life.



Final Thoughts

The Well-Being Star is a well-rounded tool that enhances social prescribing projects by providing structure, facilitating conversations, and supporting action planning. While there are some challenges related to consistency and subjectivity, its overall benefits make it a valuable addition to Clanrye Group's service provision. By using this model, Clanrye is able to support clients in making meaningful improvements in their well-being while also fulfilling funder requirements and organisational goals.

NIACRO

Pre- and Post-Completion Questionnaires

NIACRO's Centre for Development manages the development and coordinates the delivery of a range of training and learning opportunities, accredited by SFJ Awards, OCNNI and the CPD Certification Service. We use a model of pre- and post-completion questionnaires for several of our courses and learning packages, particularly those accredited through SFJ Awards and OCNNI, to ensure quality, demonstrate impact, and contribute to continuous improvement of learning provision. This model is core to our commitment to delivering effective learning opportunities.

The Model and its Components

The core elements of this model consist of two questionnaires designed to demonstrate impact by measuring shifts in learners' knowledge, understanding and confidence and their application. Specifically these assessments comprise:

-
- **Pre-Course Questionnaire:** Completed by learners before the course begins, this assessment establishes a baseline understanding of their existing knowledge and understanding related to the learning outcomes and their confidence applying these in work/life contexts.
- **Post-Course Questionnaire:** Completed after the course, this assessment mirrors the pre-course assessment questions, enabling direct comparison of learners' knowledge, understanding and confidence before and after the training. It also includes questions about the perceived value of the course, its impact on professional practice, and intended future application of the learning.

Question Types

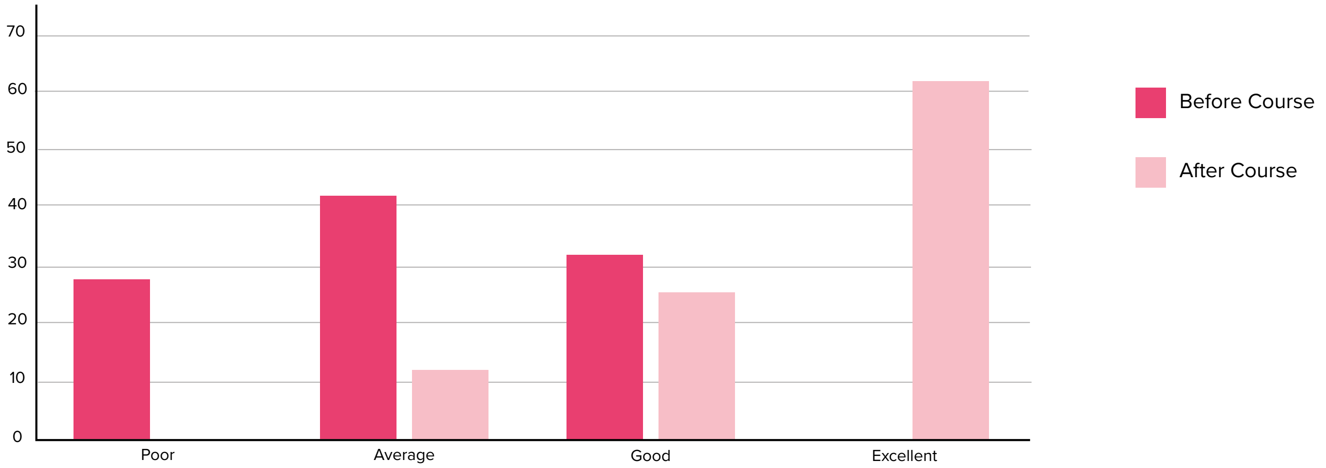
The pre-course questionnaire uses a blend of question types, including:

- **multiple-choice questions** where learners rate their current knowledge, understanding and confidence in relation to key learning outcome areas;
- **open-ended questions** asking learners about their hopes and expectation for the course, and how they hope to use what they learn; and
- **open-ended questions** to determine what if any support needs the learner may have and what if any special requirements may need to be put in place.
- **The post-course questionnaire** also incorporates a mix of question types, which include:
- **multiple-choice questions,** revisiting the key learning outcome areas to assess changes in knowledge, understanding, and confidence;
- **multiple-choice responses** to statements evaluating various aspects of the training delivery, such as pace, duration, resources, and assessment tasks;
- **multiple-choice questions** gauging whether the training met expectations, enhanced awareness, contributed to professional development, and provided a supportive learning environment; and
- **open-ended questions,** gathering qualitative feedback on the aforementioned points, and soliciting insights on how learners intend to apply their acquired knowledge, as well as suggestions for enhancing the training's effectiveness.
- **Medium:** While NIACRO may use paper-based evaluations in certain circumstances, we are increasingly using electronic platforms for data collection and analysis, such as SmartSurvey. This enables efficient data management, reduces administrative burden, and facilitates timely reporting.

Example of Impact Data Gathered During 2024

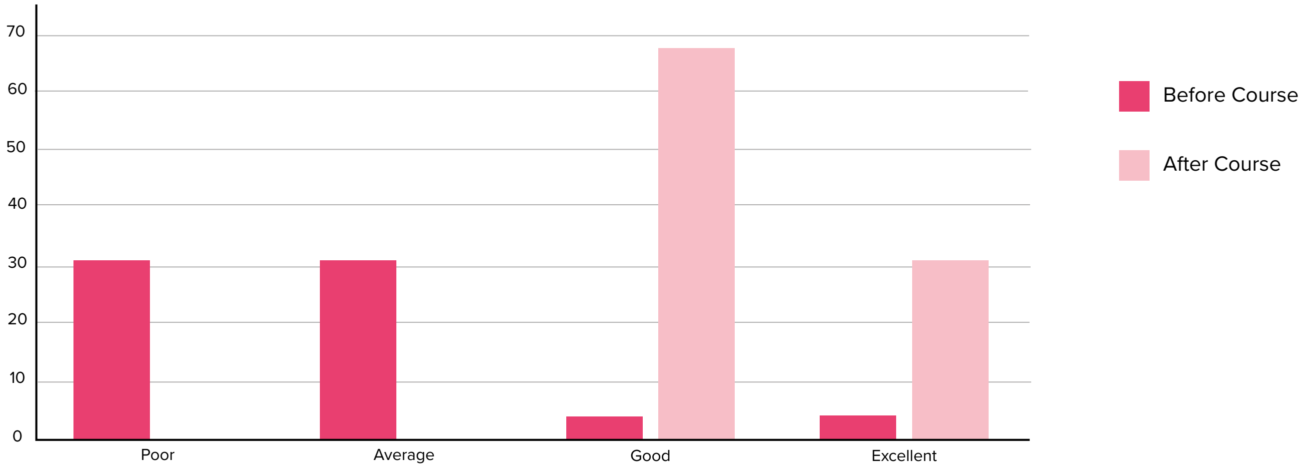
In 2024 NIACRO delivered its Supporting Women Through and Beyond the Criminal Justice System course three times. The course is designed for professional working with women with lived experience of the justice system and aims to enhance knowledge, skills and confidence to meet the needs of women more effectively, using collaborative and gender responsive approaches. The course is written at Level 4 and is delivered one day a week over five weeks.

By using our model of pre- and post-course questionnaires, we were able to gather data which demonstrated significant shifts in learners' knowledge, understanding and confidence across all the learning outcomes, as per the figures below.



The training was extensive and covered all bases. Even coming from a role who had an idea of the criminal justice landscape I feel like I have gain[ed] valuable knowledge. Learner A.

Throughout my work this training is incredibly useful to improve my understanding of meaningful support for women within the justice system. Learner B



This training has been so eye opening to the life of women who enter the CJS, I feel like it will forever influence my practice going forward. It is essential learning for any new recruitment into any agency (working) with women who are in contact with the CJS. Participant C

Across the three cohorts of learners on the course during 2024, 95% confirmed that the course had positively contributed to their professional development and that they planned to use the learning to raise awareness and enhance support for women with lived experience of the justice system. This is illustrated by the quotations below.

I definitely appreciate the importance of a gendered lens and will be sharing information about this with colleagues. Participant D

To influence /educate others around the need for, and benefits of a gender responsive approach. On a very personal /professional level, do all I can in my role to embrace a gender responsive approach and continue to support and advocate on behalf of young women /women in the CJS. Participant E

Advantages of the Model:

- Demonstrating Impact: The pre- and post-course evaluation model provides concrete evidence of the effectiveness of our training programmes. The data can be examined on a course by course basis as well as aggregated across the year. It allows us to demonstrate the extent to which learners have gained knowledge, understanding and confidence in their application, and changed their practice.
- Informing Curriculum Development: The evaluation data provides valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the training content and delivery, enabling us to refine and improve future iterations.
- Meeting Funder Requirements: The model provides necessary data to meet funders' requirements to demonstrate the impact of our training through robust evaluation. This data is valuable in supporting funding applications and reports.
- Enhancing Learner Engagement: The model can also serve as a tool for learner engagement. By reflecting on their learning journey, learners can gain a deeper understanding of their own development and value of engaging with this learning opportunity, as well as plan for their continued learning / Continuous Professional Development.
- Quality Assurance: This model allows us to maintain a high level of quality across our learning provision, ensuring that the content is relevant, up to date and beneficial for the learners.

Limitations of the Model:

- Self-Reporting Bias: Learners' self-assessments may be influenced by social desirability bias or other factors.
- Limited Long-Term Follow-Up: While the post-course assessment measures immediate changes, it does not capture the long-term impact of the training on learners' practice.
- Resource Intensive: Conducting and analysing evaluations requires time and resources.

During 2025 we will continue to enhance this model to maximise the benefits and address the limitations to make the data capture process more efficient.

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