A National Skills Framework for the Voluntary Sector

Delivering the skills priorities 2011 to 2014

A Virtual Academy Model

Julie Wilkes
October 2010

Contents

Introduction

Skills – Third Sector is the strategic body for developing skills in charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations. We want to make it easier for charities and social enterprises to have the right skills to make a difference to people in their communities.

We want proper recognition of the sector's skills and talents, because skills matter to the sector's ability to meet the challenges in the period ahead. We are proposing a 'virtual academy model' as a delivery framework to help organisations and learners get the most out of ever scarcer resources for development.

We are emerging from a period of significant investment in the sector's capacity through publicly funded programmes into a period of austerity. We need to build on the legacy of these programmes and understand what we have learned. As public spending gets tighter, we need to show how the investment organisations make now in the skills of their staff, volunteers and trustees is key to their future sustainability. Above all we want to make sure that scarce resources are shared openly, properly targeted, and linked to quality standards to maximise their effectiveness.

Julie Wilkes
Chief Executive, Skills – Third Sector

October 2010

The Consultation in Context

Within this context, we set out for consultation the following vision to meet the voluntary sector's skills priorities.

For the sector to have:

- training and skills development based on good evidence of skills needs

- good quality programmes linked to standards where possible

- user-led methods of learning that are flexible and affordable

- funding for skills development included in the core costs of service contracts

For providers of skills programmes to:

- work together to pool learning and expertise

- make use of good intelligence on workforce needs and best practice standards

- co-ordinate effective flexible delivery mechanisms in partnership with other organisations

- make resources go further through creative partnerships between large and small organisations

To help deliver this vision, we set out the following delivery principles.

Learning programmes should be:

- planned on the basis of labour market intelligence - i.e. based on what the sector says it needs

- linked to best practice and quality standards

- user-led, flexible and affordable

- aimed at building the capacity of the sector in key strategic areas

Finally, we identified four priority skills areas by drawing on the available research into the sector's workforce and in consultation with sector leaders. These are the four skills areas that we believe will be critical to the future performance of charities and social enterprises.

- **governance and leadership**

- **skills for business**

- **managing volunteers**

- **measuring effectiveness and impact**

During the consultation we wanted to find out what people thought of the vision and delivery principles, particularly looking to the future and the Big Society agenda. We were looking for examples of effective practice to support skills development and we asked how the skills world should change to bring about the kind of learning that the sector needs.

This report presents what we have learned from the consultation and sets out our proposal for how a national framework to support priority skills development should be delivered in the three year period from 2011 to 2014. It introduces our idea for four 'virtual skills academies' - one for each of the four priority skills areas.

We are grateful to all the participants and online respondents who have given their time and expertise to the consultation.

The Consultation

We set out a framework for a national skills strategy for the voluntary sector in a consultation paper that we published in July 2010. We then held a series of regional roundtable events with key stakeholders in all nine of the English regions[3] and an additional roundtable in London for national stakeholder bodies and government departments. People could also contribute to the consultation through an online survey and by sending us their responses directly.

Over a hundred organisations participated in the roundtable events, including representatives from national and local voluntary organisations, sector umbrella organisations, voluntary, statutory and private learning providers, infrastructure bodies, Regional Development Agencies, and sector skills councils. Over 130 people working in the sector responded to the online consultation.

The consultation paper and the online survey are at www.skills-thirdsector.org.uk.

What we mean by skills

When we talk about skills we mean the practical abilities and knowledge that people need to do their jobs well and make a difference to people and their communities.

Our consultation looked at skills in the broadest sense ranging from accredited training leading to nationally recognised work-based qualifications through to informal skills exchanges.

---

[1] These events took place in Birmingham, Cambridge, Leicester, Leeds, London, Manchester, Newcastle and Taunton between 9 July and 25 September 2010.

What the sector said: responses to the consultation

Over 80% of respondents agreed with our vision for skills development for the sector and the delivery principles we set out. This comment was typical.

"I think this is common sense - if research suggests certain skills development is needed in the sector, then it makes sense to base learning programmes on this. Any learning programmes must build sector capacity, be affordable (especially with the pending funding cuts) and linked to best practice."

Taking the main themes of the vision and delivery principles this is what the sector told us.

Basing training and skills development on evidence of need

We are the national reference point for research on the voluntary sector and its workforce, known as labour market intelligence. We commission voluntary sector partners and academic institutions to research the skills trends and priorities for voluntary sector organisations. We also pull together, in partnership with researchers, data collected by other organisations that tells us more about the voluntary sector workforce and its development needs. We work with other organisations to ensure that this labour market intelligence is used to plan workforce development.

Seventy-three per cent of respondents wanted us to publish credible workforce intelligence so that training could be planned based on what the sector needs.

User-led, flexible learning

Employers, staff, volunteers and trustees want to be able to find the training they need. Respondents called for providers to cater for the real demands of organisations and individuals. They identified that for learning to be centred on the user, then people and organisations need to be able to clearly identify their learning needs and the options available to them. This means having access to good quality information, advice and guidance about learning and training.
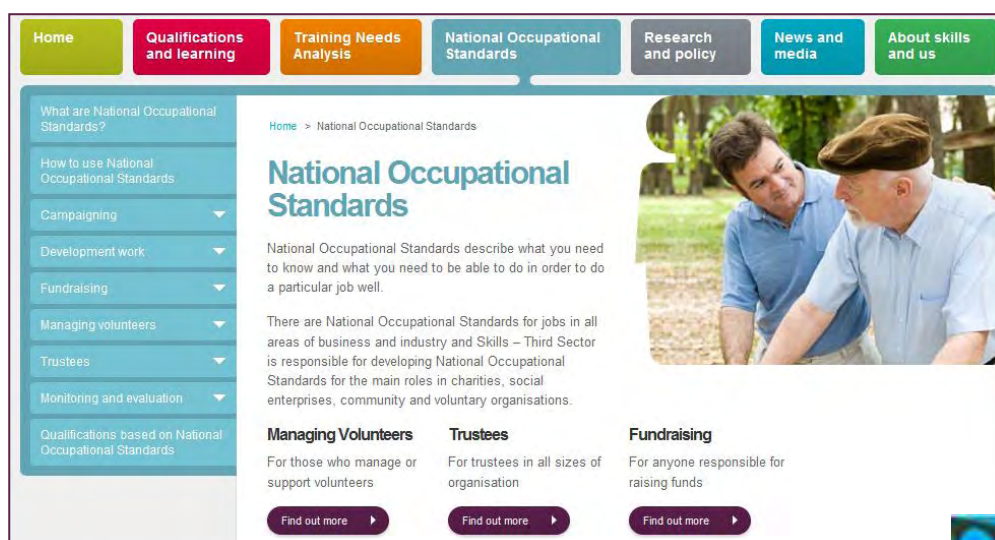
People also need to be able to access flexible training and skills development and this means being able to find local learning.

"Place is very important in our sector, local delivery is key to success. People are reluctant to travel and large scale approaches are disproportionate to the size and capacity of the huge majority of voluntary and community organisations, which contribute to the diversity and vibrancy of the work we undertake."

Quality standards

We have worked with voluntary sector employers, trustees and volunteers to produce national standards for jobs that are found predominantly, but not exclusively, in voluntary sector organisations. Known as National Occupational Standards, they set out what practitioners agree are the things people should be able to do, know and understand, to do the job well. Accredited training that is based on the skills in National Occupational Standards will be directly relevant to the job described in those standards. Informal learning can also be mapped against National Occupational Standards to make sure that it too will build the relevant skills, knowledge and understanding that will allow someone to do that role better.

"The link to best practice is the key - as one can then maintain total quality management, just like the commercial sector, and maintain a high service both internal and external."

Affordable learning and resourcing

Respondents supported free and low-cost skills exchanges. Skills exchanges were seen as an essential element of the learning that should be available to the voluntary sector, particularly for smaller organisations. Informal learning was not only seen as an affordable option but as a key driver in developing skills in the sector generally, particularly if it was offered as part of a learning package that included formal learning and the opportunities to accredit experience.

"As a federal organisation we find being able to demonstrate competence through accredited qualification an objective way of determining our capacity. That said we also complement this type of learning with bespoke unaccredited training that promotes consistent ways of working by being linked to National Occupational Standards, external or internal quality standards. This helps to protect our reputation, and where we have them, branded products and services."

Models for low-cost learning suggested by respondents include blended learning and e-learning programmes potentially supported by pro-bono mentoring as part of developing management skills in the sector. These included skills swaps between organisations for developing specific expertise. Secondments between private or public sector organisations to bring new skills into the sector and practice-based action learning were favoured alongside more formal practice guides and training events.

Respondents also agreed that the costs of developing the workforce should be integral to service contracts. Seventy-eight per cent of them want us to advocate for the cost of training to be included in commissioning programmes, but with a caveat:

"This seems broadly right; the emphasis needs to be on learner-led skills development. It is right that skills development costs be built into core costs of public service contracts, but this should not mean that public sector commissioners get to dictate to third sector organisations."

Make resources go further through creative partnerships

There was considerable support for the idea that learning providers should come together in broad coalitions and join up resources, making sure that small learning providers were not excluded from this process. Many people recognised the problem of skills development and training happening in isolated pockets and the potential waste of resources this creates.

"I think that a shared interest agenda will benefit all of us. The National Occupational Standards framework enables us to work together to common purpose. We don't need then to lobby for our own sets of skills."

Respondents also recognised that creative partnerships could provide greater networking opportunities and higher quality, more consistent provision. This may prove especially important in relation to the threats to traditional infrastructure organisations. Information will still need to reach the smaller organisations and more remote localities. The future may depend upon more specialised and flexible infrastructure which specifically targets support where it is needed most.

"I can also see infrastructure organisations seizing this, which is both positive and negative as they will make a case for taking funding and holding the delivery mechanisms and be the 'gateways'. On the one hand this appears to be a good idea. However, the negatives outweigh this because this approach takes a lot of money out (they will top slice and take fees) of the system and it will get weighed down by layers of bureaucracy as has been the case with for example Capacitybuilders funding. I would recommend taking a refreshed look at delivery partners - e.g. well established organisations or networks and partnerships, a centre of excellence in social enterprise. There is a lot less money around in 2010 and resourcing this needs to be as near the front line as possible."

Some respondents cited the model of community learning champions as an effective way to built up enthusiasm for training.

"There is so much choice out there! A provider that could demonstrate an understanding of this sector would get my attention, as long as they had decent references and were affordable. If providers demonstrated the links to best practice standards this would also narrow the search down. I think this may be particularly helpful to charities that do not employ their own learning and development staff as it would make the process of sourcing and selecting a provider more objective."

The Virtual Skills Academy model: new frameworks for partnership

Following the consultation, we are proposing a national strategic skills framework for the Voluntary Sector using a Virtual Skills Academy model based on the following:

- Co-operation – countering the waste of competition

- Informal development opportunities – with links to accreditation

- Map and scale up effective provision

- Endorsement of good delivery principles

- Generate and spread new knowledge

- Web-based resources

- Local delivery points and offline networks

- Built-in evaluation cycle - what works

- User-led governance

Informal and accredited learning

The virtual skills academy model includes both informal and accredited learning as essential components of a skills system for the sector.

Informal learning systems are equally valued, offering shadowing, skills exchanges, peer support, mentoring, inputs and briefings on key knowledge, and introductory 'tasters' to enable learners to sample what is on offer. Such informal learning could also be a good means of providing the "softer skills" necessary for the workplace.

The skills academies could endorse learning that meets their good practice delivery principles and promote high quality accredited programmes, particularly those that are offered in flexible, affordable units.

"I think there is an urgent need to unpick current training needs analysis, delivery, cost and effectiveness. Equally there is a need for higher learning opportunities to harness the talents of staff who have academic and practical ability so that a high quality cohort of leaders is supported to develop. This is a significant gap as it impacts on networking and influence at strategic levels."

Information, advice and guidance

Good quality information, advice and guidance is essential for learning to be based on what employers, staff, volunteers and trustees need and to put the learner at the heart of the delivery frameworks. Good quality information is needed to give people clear options about the costs of training, guide them through different options and set out the merits of different forms of learning. Academies also need to promote the benefits of apprenticeships in the sector.

"Training and skills development can traditionally be determined by what the provider wants to offer, rather than what the learner needs to learn. Principles which turn this round are more likely to lead to sustainable skills development."

Filling the gaps in training development infrastructure

In the face of public cuts the organisations who have been delivering skills development opportunities over the last decade may not be there in 2011 to 2014: points where people have accessed local training are among the most vulnerable at present.

"But from March 2011 there are no government, regional or national sources of funding for workforce development. This is the first time in 20 years there is no recognisable fund for the sector to deliver its core programme of workforce development to the sector. Attempts to raise this concern at a time of recession are falling on deaf ears. It is a policy issue which needs raising by Skills - Third Sector to government."

However, the sector tells us that they want to be able to find flexible local training. Skills academies could provide a way of planning and reviewing learning provision in the context of localism. The developing role of Local Employment Partnerships will be important following the demise of the Regional Development Agencies in the regional co-ordination of skills strategies and the provision and evaluation of local learning.

Virtual Academies could support training and learning across geographical boundaries and provide guidance on how to develop and support local provision without 'reinventing the wheel' and wasting resources. Academies could support the development of local access points that are flexible and provide good quality programmes through systems of franchising or distance learning with local supports.

Next steps

We are mapping the skills and learning development opportunities there are for the sector across the four skills priority areas of:

- governance and leadership

- skills for business

- managing volunteers

- measuring impact and effectiveness

This includes formal and informal opportunities, large and small scale, and low-cost options. We are gathering together examples of good skills development practice from responses to the consultation. And we are looking at the labour market intelligence in each of these areas, and evaluating the legacy of the recent national development programmes that have built skills and learning in these areas.

We are looking to develop the skills academy concept in partnership from the outset. We propose to draw together key providers and stakeholders in the four priority skills areas and together we will explore the benefits of setting up virtual skills academies in each of the priority areas.

Each coalition will determine their own menu of activity but other skills academy models include activities such as:

- employer engagement

- using labour market intelligence to inform planning

- pooling of development resources across regions

- an endorsement programme based on key delivery principles

- voluntary skills exchanges and low cost learning

- marketing and support for delivery franchises

- blended and e-learning at local delivery points

- sharing across sectors and regions

- better information, advice and guidance

- routes to accredited learning

We are aware that the success of these networks for learning depends on the willingness of different interest groups in the skills world and the sector to pool resources, share knowledge and expertise, and to co-operate across organisational boundaries in joint ventures.

However, we believe that the advantages of doing this, at this point in time, are clear.

Getting involved

We welcome approaches from organisations who would like to be part of the discussions on skills academy models. In the first instance, please email info@skills-thirdsector.org.uk to register your interest.

We will post further information and updates on our website at www.skills-thirdsector.org.uk where you can also sign up to join our mailing list.

Appendix - Survey Summary

1. Our vision for good quality skills development

For the voluntary sector to have:
- training based on research into the skills the sector needs
- quality programmes linked to standards where possible (standards are National Occupational Standards that define what skills and knowledge someone needs to do a particular role well)
- flexible, affordable ways of learning that are led by what learners and organisations want
- the cost of skills development built into the core costs of public service contracts
- access to partnerships between large and small organisations to help make resources go further

For providers of skills programmes to:
- work together to pool learning and expertise
- use research into what the sector needs and best practice standards to plan and deliver training
- offer flexible learning
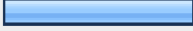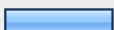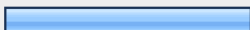
1a) Is this the right vision for the sector?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		82.2%	106
No		7.0%	9
Not sure		10.9%	14
	1b) Is there anything that you would change or add?		44
		answered question	129
		skipped question	2

2. What types of skills development does your organisation offer?

		Response Percent	Response Count
courses that lead to accredited qualifications		**59.1%**	**55**
courses not leading to a accredited qualification		37.6%	35
action learning sets (learning by sharing information and concerns with a group of peers)		32.3%	30
in-house training (provided by your manager or HR department)		34.4%	32
coaching (you have someone who supports you to develop specific skills which are agreed by both of you from the beginning)		31.2%	29
mentoring (you have someone available to help you build your skills and you decide what support you need and that can change during the time you are being mentored)		19.4%	18
distance learning (most of your studying is done in your own time although there may be some taught elements)		12.9%	12
skills sharing (you exchange skills with your peers inside or outside your own organisation)		45.2%	42
work shadowing (you shadow someone while they do their job either inside or outside your own organisation)		18.3%	17
cross-sector skills sharing (you learn from someone who works in a different sector than the voluntary sector but who is at a similar level as you)		19.4%	18
A delivery method that is not on our list - please say what it is.			7
answered question			93
skipped question			38

3. Which methods are most effective for building skills in your organisation? Please select up to THREE.

		Response Percent	Response Count
courses that lead to accredited qualifications		**59.1%**	**55**
courses not leading to a accredited qualification		37.6%	35
action learning sets (learning by sharing information and concerns with a group of peers)		32.3%	30
in-house training (provided by your manager or HR department)		34.4%	32
coaching (you have someone who supports you to develop specific skills which are agreed by both of you from the beginning)		31.2%	29
mentoring (you have someone available to help you build your skills and you decide what support you need and that can change during the time you are being mentored)		19.4%	18
distance learning (most of your studying is done in your own time although there may be some taught elements)		12.9%	12
skills sharing (you exchange skills with your peers inside or outside your own organisation)		45.2%	42
work shadowing (you shadow someone while they do their job either inside or outside your own organisation)		18.3%	17
cross-sector skills sharing (you learn from someone who works in a different sector than the voluntary sector but who is at a similar level as you)		19.4%	18
A delivery method that is not on our list - please say what it is.			7
		answered question	93
		skipped question	38

4. Why are these methods the best ones for building skills in your organisation?

	Response Count
	81
answered question	81
skipped question	50

5. Governance and leadership

	yes	no	not sure	Response Count
Are these skills needed in your organisation?	85.6% (77)	14.4% (13)	1.1% (1)	90
Can you find good quality training in this area?	63.2% (55)	19.5% (17)	18.4% (16)	87
Is the training accredited?	33.3% (29)	35.6% (31)	33.3% (29)	87
			answered question	90
			skipped question	41

6. Skills for business

	yes	no	not sure	Response Count
Are these skills needed in your organisation?	84.1% (74)	15.9% (14)	1.1% (1)	88
Can you find good quality training in this area?	50.0% (43)	25.6% (22)	24.4% (21)	86
Is the training accredited?	36.9% (31)	27.4% (23)	44.0% (37)	84
			answered question	88
			skipped question	43
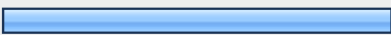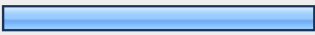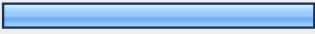
7. Managing volunteers

	yes	no	not sure	Response Count
Are these skills needed in your organisation?	**70.8% (63)**	28.1% (25)	1.1% (1)	89
Can you find good quality training in this area?	**63.1% (53)**	20.2% (17)	16.7% (14)	84
Is the training accredited?	**43.9% (36)**	23.2% (19)	32.9% (27)	82
			answered question	89
			skipped question	42

8. Measuring impact and effectiveness

	yes	no	not sure	Response Count
Are these skills needed in your organisation?	**91.0% (81)**	7.9% (7)	1.1% (1)	89
Can you find good quality training in this area?	**40.9% (36)**	35.2% (31)	23.9% (21)	88
Is the training accredited?	12.9% (11)	40.0% (34)	**49.4% (42)**	85
			answered question	89
			skipped question	42

9. Do you have any good examples of learning (formal or informal) that built skills in your organisation in any of the four priority areas. You can draw on your personal experiences of learning. Please give enough details so that we can find the learning you highlight.

|	Response Percent	Response Count
Governance and leadership	**71.4%**	30
Skills for business	57.1%	24
Managing volunteers	57.1%	24
Measuring effectiveness and impact	59.5%	25
answered question		42
skipped question		89

10. **Are there any other skills needs not covered in our four priority areas that your organisation needs?**

	Response Count
	39
answered question	39
skipped question	92

11. **Are there any resources (publications, online, digital, etc.) you would recommend that have supported learning in any of the four skills priority areas.**

	yes	no	not sure	Response Count
governance and leadership	**47.9% (35)**	38.4% (28)	13.7% (10)	73
skills for business	32.4% (22)	**47.1% (32)**	20.6% (14)	68
managing volunteers	37.7% (26)	**47.8% (33)**	14.5% (10)	69
measuring effectiveness and impact	42.5% (31)	**45.2% (33)**	12.3% (9)	73
If yes, please tell us which skills priority(ies) they support and what they are in a way that means we are able to locate them.				40
answered question				80
skipped question				51

12. **Would ways of delivering training based on these principles benefit your organisation?**

		Response Percent	Response Count
yes		**80.2%**	65
no		6.2%	5
not sure		13.6%	11
Please tell us why you have given the answer above - ie why you think they will or won't benefit your organisation or why you don't know.			54
answered question			81
skipped question			50

13. **Do you have any examples of training you have done or know about that fit these principles. Please say which principle(s) it fits and tell us about it in a way that means we could locate it.**

	Response Count
	33
answered question	33
skipped question	98
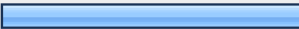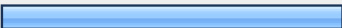
14. **Are there any issues or problems with our delivery principles for you?**

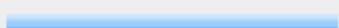|	Response Count
	41
answered question	41
skipped question	90

15. **There are a number of ways that Skills - Third Sector can support skills development for our sector. Please select all the options from the following list that you would find useful. Large scale strategic support**

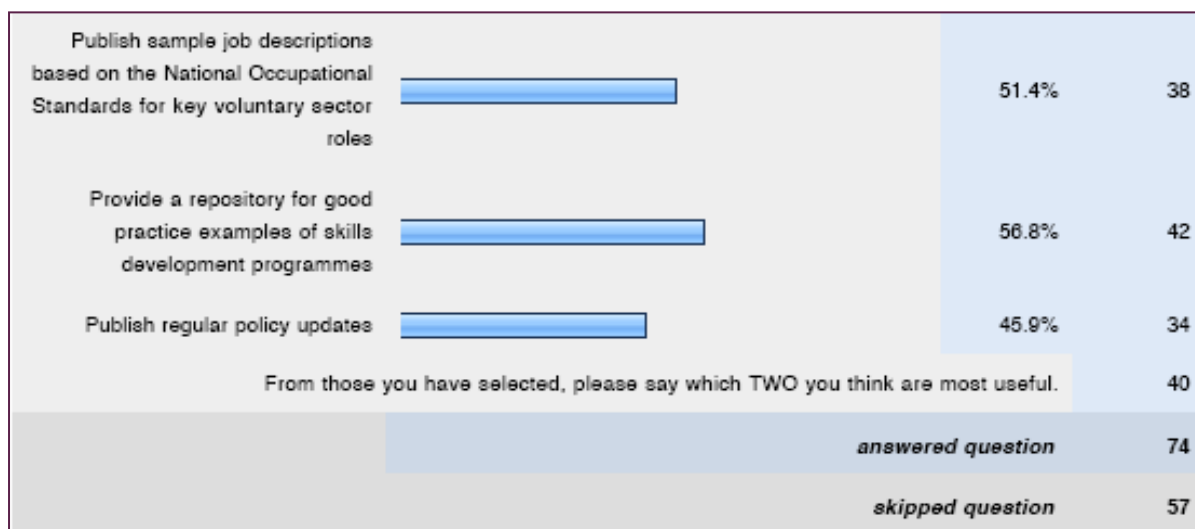|	Response Percent	Response Count
Help develop work-based qualifications in third sector roles that can be studied in short, flexible units	82.4%	61
Develop apprenticeships for the voluntary sector	67.6%	50
Support training based on the research on what the sector needs and national standards, where appropriate	75.7%	56
Advocate for trusts, foundations and government to include the costs of learning in their grant and commissioning programmes	78.4%	58

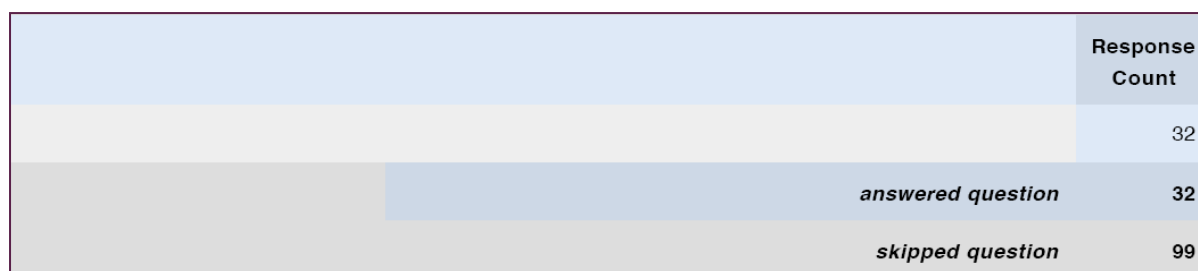|		Response Percent	Response Count
Provide a web-based Skill Exchange offering low cost / no cost skills exchange opportunities		59.5%	44
Set up a virtual learning academy for the sector offering / approving training based on good practice principles		55.4%	41
Endorse good quality skills development through a quality mark		56.8%	42
Raise the demand for skills by demonstrating the impact and benefits of developing staff and volunteers		63.5%	47
From those you have selected, please say which TWO you think are most useful.			58
	answered question		74
	skipped question		57

16. There are a number of ways that Skills - Third Sector can support skills development for our sector. Please select all the options from the following list that you would find useful. Information and resources

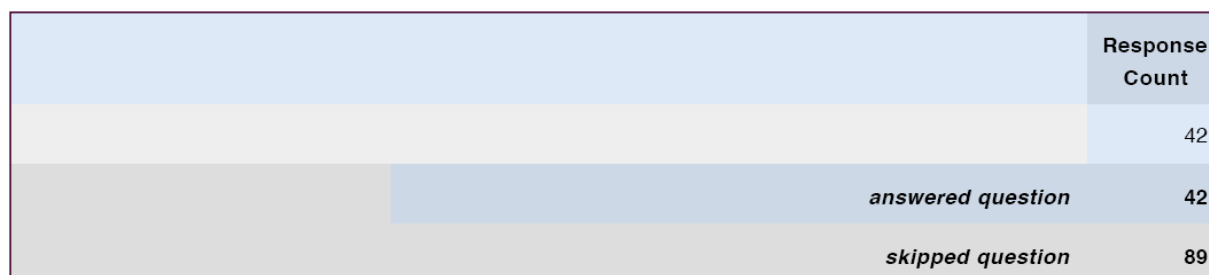|		Response Percent	Response Count
Publicise voluntary sector workforce research so that training can be planned based on what the sector needs		73.0%	54
Publicise monitoring and evaluation tools based on national standards so training can be evaluated based on the skills employers agree someone needs to do their job well		66.2%	49
Contextualise the skills and knowledge in other national occupational standards so it is directly relevant to voluntary sector organisations		62.2%	46
Publish guides on the skills and knowledge that people need to do their jobs well		64.9%	48

Publish sample job descriptions based on the National Occupational Standards for key voluntary sector roles	51.4%	38
Provide a repository for good practice examples of skills development programmes	56.8%	42
Publish regular policy updates	45.9%	34
From those you have selected, please say which TWO you think are most useful.		40
answered question		74
skipped question		57

17. Is there anything else that Skills - Third Sector could do that would support the skills needs in your organisation?

	Response Count
	32
answered question	32
skipped question	99

18. Is there anything else we should consider when writing the national skills strategy for the sector?

	Response Count
	42
answered question	42
skipped question	89

19.   What term best describes your organisation (please choose one)

		Response Percent	Response Count
Registered charity		52.8%	38
International NGO		0.0%	0
Social Enterprise		8.3%	6
Voluntary organisation		8.3%	6
Membership organisation		1.4%	1
NDPB (Non-departmental Public Body)		4.2%	3
Infrastructure organisation		19.4%	14
Training organisation		1.4%	1
College or university		2.8%	2
Funder		1.4%	1
Other (please specify)			12
	answered question		72
	skipped question		59

20. What term best describes the role that you do in your organisation (please choose one)

		Response Percent	Response Count
CEO or director		26.8%	19
Manager		**36.6%**	**26**
HR manager or have responsibility for training		8.5%	6
Other employee		18.3%	13
Trustee		5.6%	4
Volunteer		0.0%	0
Training provider		1.4%	1
Consultant		2.8%	2
Funder		0.0%	0
Other (please specify)			10
		answered question	71
		skipped question	60

21. **Please tick which, if any, of the following types of individuals or groups your organisation works with:**

	Response Percent	Response Count
all sections of the community	87.3%	62
people from black or other minority ethnic communities	32.4%	23
disabled people	33.8%	24
people with mental health problems	38.0%	27
people with physical health problems	32.4%	23
lesbians, gays, bisexuals or transsexuals	28.2%	20
offenders or ex-offenders	31.0%	22
Are there any other disadvantaged groups with whom your organisation works? Please list		36
answered question		71
skipped question		60