

ACCESSIBLE EVALUATION: CASE STUDY 1

Tackling Inactivity in Colleges: Adapting an evaluation survey for students with additional learning needs

Sport England's Tackling Inactivity in Colleges fund is supporting 49 colleges to help their students be more active and achieve better physical and mental wellbeing.

To aid evaluation we produced a questionnaire that students completed, on paper or online, at two points – before they started the programme to collect their baseline wellbeing and activity levels, and then three months later to show if anything had changed.

Collecting evidence like this helps Sport England build a case for investing in audiences who are less active and find out what sorts of projects are most effective, so it was vital the evaluation worked well.



On trialling the questionnaire, one of the colleges found some of the questions unsuitable for many of their students with learning disabilities, as well as those who use English as a second language.

The challenging questions included credible, validated measures in the Single Item Measure for Physical Activity, and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale. But this rigour counts for nothing if the audience can't understand the questions.

Specific issues included:

- **The survey took too long to complete** – Students found it hard to concentrate for long enough and if they needed support it took up a lot of staff time.
- **Students found the number of ways to respond confusing** – Questions had to be answered in a variety of ways, including a tick box, a rating scale, a written response, and others.
- **The questions included challenging concepts** – Such as feeling happy, satisfied, and that life is worthwhile, which were often hard to understand.
- **Students found it hard to recall how much physical activity** they had done in the previous week.



To address this, Sport England contracted the disability charity Leonard Cheshire to redevelop the survey so that it was more accessible for students with a range of language and learning needs.

Leonard Cheshire was chosen as it was clear they **understood the audience**, and would place the **students at the centre of the process**.

They designed two surveys – one that could be completed by students independently and a second for students with higher support needs that involved using an emoji paddle and could be completed with support.

Leonard Cheshire then developed a detailed brief for a testing session involving 20 students with varying needs at Lewisham Southwark College in South East London.

In the morning, staff from Leonard Cheshire and Sport England spent time doing activities with the students and college staff to develop rapport and trust. This was an important first step and led into an afternoon of testing the survey and gathering feedback from the students and support staff that was used to develop the next version of the survey.



What we learned:

- **Shorter is better:** The length of the survey needs to be short and snappy. Students and support staff (if used) need to concentrate for the duration – if either lose this focus, the quality (and accuracy) of the response quickly decreased.
- **Offer support, but only if needed:** Surveys should be completed independently where possible. This improves the accuracy of the information as it hasn't been interpreted by somebody else and can increase a student's confidence. But if support is needed, provide it.
- **Keep support impartial:** If you provide support to fill out questionnaires, it's vital that the person helping is as objective as possible and does not steer the student to answer in a particular way. If another person has completed a survey on behalf of someone else, note this down to inform any analysis and interpretation of the results.
- **Make complicated things simpler:** Our physical activity question asked on how many days students were active, for at least 30 minutes, in the last week. Thirty minutes was difficult for them to quantify, so we removed the reference to an amount and left it to their interpretation what 'being active' meant. We also tried listing the days of the week to aid recall but realised we didn't know what day to start with as the question might be completed on any day. So we left it as a 0-7 days scale.
- **Highlight the value of good evidence:** We explained to students, teachers and support staff how the evaluation data is used to help improve the project and potentially make it available to more people. Helping them understand this value motivated them to complete it and provided reassurance that it wasn't about being intrusive or collecting personal information.
- **Get to know your audience:** Building rapport and trust with the students through doing activities together created an open and welcome environment for discussion and feedback.
- **Make it relevant to them:** Some of the questions were hard for students to understand, even after we'd simplified the language. So we talked through the questions with them, and gave examples relevant to them and their life. Knowing the individuals was important here.
- **Clear and consistent design:** This applied to the format, layout, and to how we used symbols and emojis. In our first draft a smiley face represented 'happy' in some questions, and 'yes' in others. This was confusing, so we swapped in a 'thumbs up' and 'thumbs down' sign for 'yes' and 'no' answers instead.

This process showed how important it was for us to involve the audience in the design of the evaluation, and to use Leonard Cheshire's expertise to help us do this effectively.

[Here's a link to the final questionnaire](#), which we are now using to collect data and carry out an accessible evaluation of this important project.

We would like to thank the students and staff at Lewisham Southwark College, for their feedback, enthusiasm and time, and to Leonard Cheshire for all their valuable help and expertise.





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