

Research Results

Have you ever wondered about
how not-for-profits learn?

Or about whether trustees,
employees and volunteers are
given equal learning opportunities?



I did, so I used my Master's dissertation to find out more...

**"Exploring employee and volunteer experiences
of learning across their organisations and
relationships between training, organisational
resilience, funding and learning cultures in social
sector organisations"**

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Background

Substantial evidence across academic literature shows the benefits of learning within organisations, for both employees and volunteers. Learning can improve engagement and retention as well as improving organisational performance. It can also improve personal resilience - vital for social sector organisations.

Yet only 45% of social sector organisations have a dedicated training budget and 19% of organisations reported spending nothing on training (Larkham, 2023).

Further research has explored how organisations can be Learning Organisations - “an organisation which facilitates the learning of all of its members and continuously transforms itself to meet strategic goals” (Pedler, Boydell and Burgoyne, 1981). Evidence shows positive correlations between Learning Organisations and performance, across sectors.

Social sector organisations work closely with service users, volunteers, employees and trustees; are all of these groups encouraged to learn? In organisations which seek to address power imbalances, both internally and externally, and promote participatory decision making this is particularly pertinent.

Does the amount of formal or informal learning attended influence the extent to which an organisation is a learning organisation? Does the type of funding have an influence on organisational learning?

The Dimensions of Learning Organisation Questionnaire (Marsick and Watkins, 1997) was used as a tool for measuring people’s experiences of their organisations as learning organisations as well as how they felt the experiences were for employees or volunteers. Additional questions were asked about organisational size, income and resilience.

The Results

Although this sample size is too small for conclusive evidence, it does give a strong indication of learning experiences across the social sector.

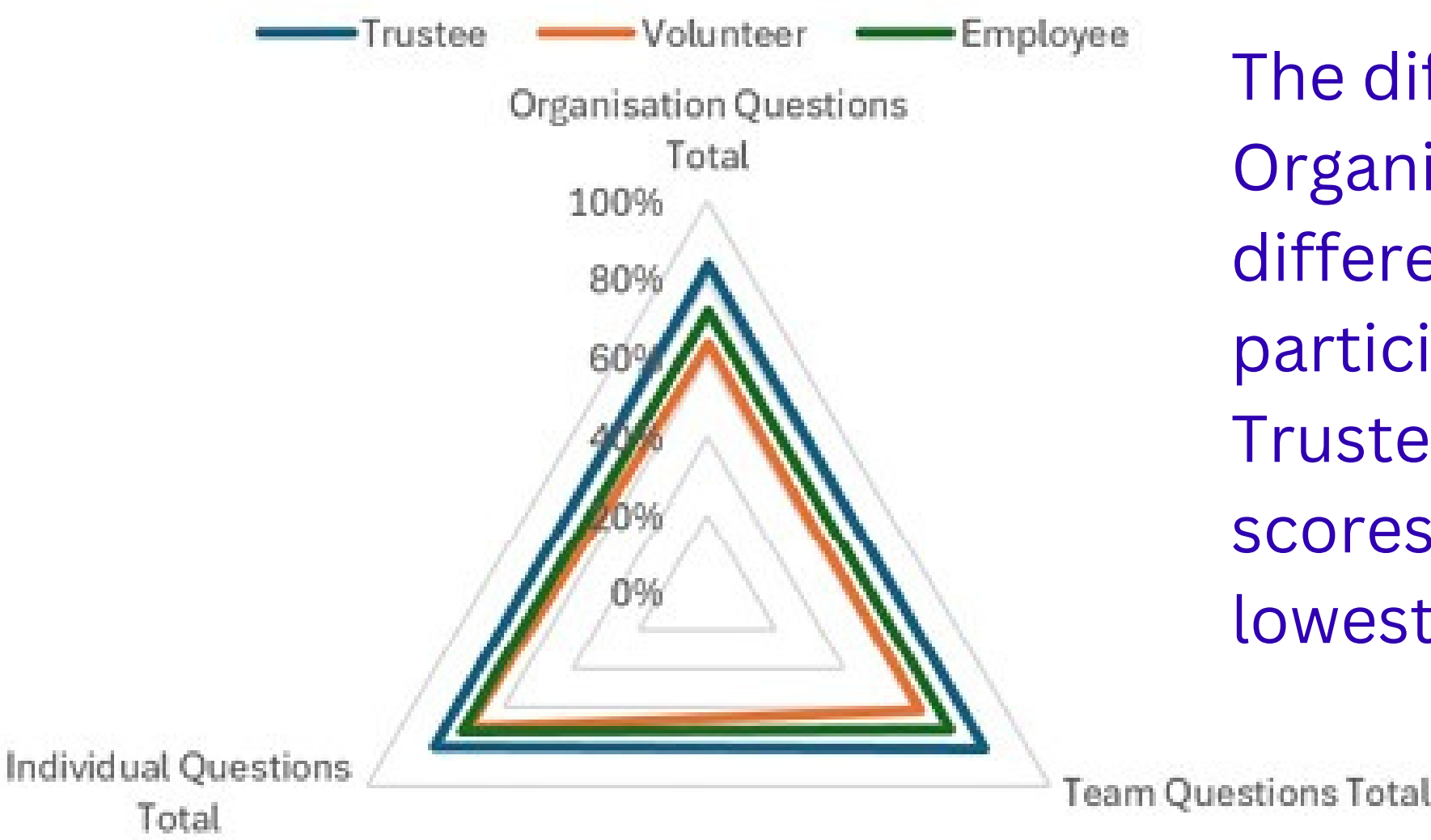
The academic nature of this research and the promotion methods, primarily LinkedIn, may have influenced the participants, as 80% were from larger organisations.

17	Days of data-collection
68	Survey Participants
43	Employees
15	Volunteers
10	Trustees

Great News!

Nearly all participants returned positive answers and believe that their organisations embed learning across the organisation, with employees scoring their organisations **93%** and volunteers giving **77%** on the Dimensions of Learning Questionnaire (mode scores) .

Role Differences In DLOQ Score %

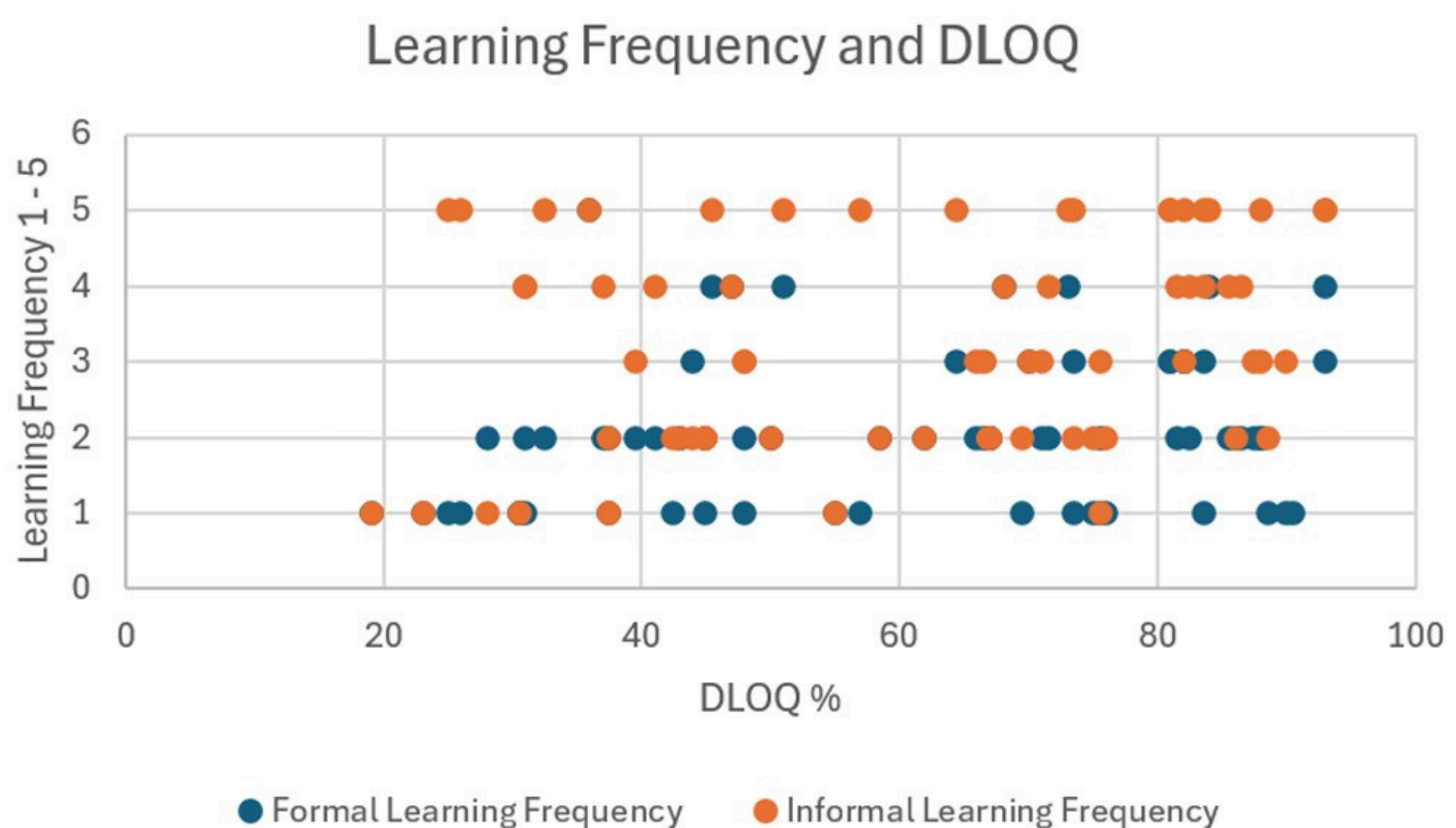


The differences in Learning Organisation scores differed depending on participants' roles, with Trustees giving the highest scores and volunteers the lowest.

Interestingly, employees rate their own experiences of learning organisations higher than how they perceive the volunteer experience, and volunteers do exactly the same, believing staff to have a poorer experience of learning than themselves.

The Results: Learning & Learning Organisation Scores

The survey also asked about participation in learning opportunities, both formal and informal. Unexpectedly, trustees reported participating in formal learning more consistently than the other groups, with 10% participating in learning activities 24 or more times a year. 70% of volunteers attended annual learning activities and sometimes more frequently. 50% of employees engaged in formal learning opportunities 1-6 times a year. These results seem to support the differences in learning experiences by role, but correlation between learning frequency and Learning Organisation scores had only a limited correlation.



Generally, there was no correlation between size of organisation and learning frequency, with both large and small organisations participating in both formal and informal learning opportunities.

The size of organisation had a marginal effect on learning organisation scores - with smaller organisations reporting slightly higher scores.

The Results: Income & Learning Organisation Scores

Despite the literature suggesting that increased learning participation and higher learning organisation scores may be the result of longer term income and financial stability, the results did not support this.

Overall, there was only a slight positive correlation between high organisational learning scores and feeling confident in their organisations' future, which may be a reflection of the current climate affecting organisations. However, 72% of participants who reported feeling confident gave positive answers for their organisational learning and only 6% of confident participants gave negative scores.

“Do you work collaboratively with your funders and supporters and view them as partners?” was asked, yielding some interesting results. 72% of employees and 90% of Trustees responded, ‘yes’ to this question, and 60% of volunteers responded, ‘Don’t know’, which potentially highlights volunteers’ disconnect from operational issues, which may or may not be desirable.

This research provides no conclusive evidence for how grant making practices and income can affect learning within social sector organisations.

However, there are strong positive correlations between high Learning Organisation scores and high participatory decision making scores. This suggests that organisations which learn are good at welcoming ideas and experiences from everyone within an organisation.

Reasons

Reviewing the literature and considering practical experience within the sector provides the following explanations for some of these results.

The high learning organisation scores given by Trustees are reflected in broader research examining the role of trustees and may be explained by the 'MUM' effect - issues of knowledge exchange within organisations, where senior leaders receive more positive reports than negative. Trustees may consider their role itself to be learning, as it enables them to use professional skills in new contexts.

Volunteers may be unaware of the learning opportunities and indeed, the scope of roles performed by employees, thus scoring their learning experiences more poorly than their own. Employees on the other hand may not provide many learning opportunities for volunteers, and consequentially score their experiences poorly. However, evidence shows that often, the very nature of volunteering, being in a new context, interacting with different people and working collaboratively, as most volunteers do, is a learning experience in itself.

Challenges

Learning is very broad, and can encompass many different realities for many people. The Dimensions of Learning Organisation Questionnaire is helpful, but offers no insight as to what 'learning' actually constitutes or consists of for participants. Further, qualitative, research would be needed to explore this in more detail.

The small sample size and its lack of representation across all organisations, particularly the smallest, make this research only a useful guide, and not conclusive - particularly for micro, volunteer-run organisations.

Suggestions for Practice

Researchers and organisations could consider the following to improve practice:

- Create more accessible methodologies to include harder to reach organisations in future research.
- Facilitate routines that make it easier to promote knowledge exchange internally. This would help embed making learning normal for everyone in the organisation.
- Develop more inclusive, and more appealing, learning for groups who may be reluctant to engage in formal learning.
- Reflect on what volunteers learn within organisations, and whether their skills and connections could be used to benefit their organisations more.
- Improve the awareness of different learning experiences for different roles and reflect on the impact this has on your organisation.
- Train trustees on the MUM effect and how your organisation can facilitate knowledge exchange to overcome this.
- Use the existing body of evidence about Learning Organisations to consider how to improve participatory decision-making, as there are many parallels.