

The Data Service and the Information Authority

The *Data Service* is intended 'to act as a single source of data and information for the FE sector'. The Data Service was established by, and receives its funding from, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Although nominally independent, the Data Service is part of the Information Management Services Unit (IMSU) located within the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). The services provided are shared by the SFA, the National Apprentice Service (NAS) and the Young Peoples' Learning Agency (YPLA).

The *Information Authority* was established by BIS to 'set data standards and govern data collection and use for further education and training provision in England'. The Information Authority is also funded by BIS.

The two bodies are linked in that the stated purpose of the Data Service is 'to deliver the initiatives of the Information Authority by managing the collection, transformation and dissemination of all further education data'.

Hopefully, and to use the old aphorism, the government and the SFA will not become so pre-occupied with weighing the proverbial FE pig that it starves to death.

Participation and attainment in government funded further education and training

Statistics recently released by the aforementioned Data Service that relate specifically to publicly funded FE programmes in 2009/10, reveal that:

- With reference to men aged 19-64 and women aged 19-59:
 - 77.7% were qualified to level 2 or above
 - 58.8% were qualified to level 3 or above
 - 37.6% were qualified to level 4 or above
- Participation rates for those aged 19+ fell by 6.1%, but for those aged 16-18 increased by 2.7%
- Combined participation rates for all ages fell by 4.2% to around 4.6 million.
- Attainment remained constant with around 3.3 million students achieving a qualification at the end of a publicly funded FE programme of study.
- The number of apprenticeship starts increased by 16.6% to around 281,000. Of these:
 - There was an increase of around 20.2% in intermediate level apprenticeship starts (to around 191,000).
 - There was a 7.9% increase in advanced apprenticeship starts (to around 88,000).
 - There were around 1,500 higher apprenticeship starts

(Provisional data for the first 9 months of 2010/11 shows that there were around 326,700 apprenticeship starts. Of these, around 215,500 were at intermediate level, around 109,500 were at advanced level and around 1,800 were at higher level.)

Participation rates in education, training and employment for 16-18 year olds

Provisional statistics recently released by the Data Service reveal that as at the end of 2010:

- The total number of 16-18 year olds in full time education and training rose to around 1.64 million. This represents a 2.0% increase on the previous year with participation rates standing at 84.4% (the highest ever)
- Of those not in full time education or training 53% were in full or part time work. This was an increase of 7% compared to the end of 2009.

- The proportion of 16-18 year olds who were not in employment, education or training (NEET) decreased to 7.3%, compared to 9.4% at the end of 2009

Destinations of leavers from higher education

Figures recently released by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) relating to around 168,400 students who graduated with either a degree or an HND in 2008/09, and whose destinations were known reveal that:

- 59% obtained full time employment (compared to 62% the previous year).
- 8% were in a combination of work and study (the same as the previous year).
- 18% continued in further full time study (compared to 16% the previous year).
- 15% were assumed to be unemployed or otherwise not in work (compared to 14% the previous year).
- 53% of those employed disclosed their salary. The mean salary at the commencement of employment was around £21,000 (compared to around £20,500 the previous year). The median salary was around £20,000 (the same as the previous year). The lower quartile was around £15,000 and the upper quartile was around £24,000 (both the same as the previous year).

Trends in youth unemployment

After hitting record highs earlier this year, there were concerns that youth unemployment would rise above the 1 million mark. These fears initially appear to be confounded by the publication of the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS). These figures show that the number of 16-24 year olds out of work fell by around 42,000 to around 917,000 in the 3 months to May 2011.

However, a closer analysis of the figures reveals that only around 4000 16-24 year olds entered the job market over this period and a significant proportion of the jobs taken were part time. I suppose the danger here is that, in the same way that a drunken man uses a lamp post, the government may start using statistics for support rather than for illumination.

So how is the rest of the reduction in youth unemployment explained? It appears that the answer to this question is that most decided to go back into full time education. The ONS figures show that the numbers of 'inactive' 16-24 year olds in full time education rose by 54,000 in the 3 months to May 2011. This is, of course, at a time when FE budgets are being cut back. Many observers feel that the real test the government (and for FE) will come in September when this year's influx of school leavers and graduates are added to those seeking to enter the job market.

Not enough being done to help young people find work

Meanwhile, a recent survey of 5,000 young people carried out on behalf of the Jack Petchey Foundation, a youth charity, found that 75% of those interviewed did not feel that enough was being done to help them find work. Other information revealed by the survey included the fact that 40% of those interviewed said that they had begun volunteering and 42% said that they were doing unpaid work in order to gain work experience.

University and Colleges Union (UCU) dispute with the Institute for Learning (IfL)

Despite recent talks which appeared to suggest that agreement on IfL fees had been reached, the UCU dispute with IfL in respect of the level of IfL fees is continuing. In a recent ballot, more than 70% of the UCU members who voted, rejected proposals to make the payment of IfL fees compulsory. The next stage in the dispute is that UCU members will now be balloted on whether they should pay or renew their IfL membership fees at all. If the ballot returns a majority of UCU members in favour of withholding payment of their IfL fees, this will have a serious impact on IfL finances. However, refusal to pay fees will also result in a breach of the statutory requirement that all teachers in publicly funded FE should be members of the IfL and technically places UCU in direct conflict with the government. The dispute has probably been made more difficult to resolve because compulsory IfL membership is being introduced at a time when the schools sector equivalent of the IfL, the General Teaching Council (GTC), has been abolished.

In the meantime, Ms Sally Hunt, the UCU General Secretary has said that 'members opposition is not just about the level of fees, but whether the IfL is a credible professional body that offers FE teachers

any value at all'. She added that 'to be effective, a professional body must enjoy the confidence of a majority of practitioners' and went on to say that 'this is something that the IfL, in its current form, simply doesn't have'. Ms Toni Fazaeli, the IfL chief executive responded by saying that the IfL was working hard 'to influence government and employers to create conditions in which professional excellence could flourish'. She added that the IfL was also 'working with the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) to increase its offer of continuing professional development' and drew attention to the fact that the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) has now ended its opposition to its members paying IfL fees.

FE staff to be offered the equivalent of a 0.42% pay rise

The Association of Colleges (AoC) has recommended that, subject to affordability, member colleges should offer staff a small pay increase worth around 0.42% overall for the 2011/12 academic and financial year. The AoC has also recommended that this offer should be made by colleges on a 'take it, or leave it' basis, with the AoC rejecting requests from unions for further negotiations.

The offer amounts to £125 for those on salaries above £21,000. Staff earning below £21,000 are to be offered £200 and those on the very lowest rungs of AoC pay scales are offered an increase of 2.3%. UCU has said that it will begin consulting members on the offer (and possible industrial action if it is rejected) in September.

National Extension College (NEC) site to be sold

Fears that the future of the NEC (one of the oldest distance learning colleges in the country and a forerunner of the Open University) has been placed in doubt, have arisen as a result of a decision by the new owners, the Learning and Skills Network (LSN), to sell the NEC site. It is expected that the sale of the NEC site will realise as much as £6.5 million for LSN. It seems that these funds are crucially needed by LSN to help secure its own financial survival in the wake of a series of ambitious acquisitions which appear to have failed to generate expected levels of revenue and to have seriously depleted the LSN's cash reserves.

Latest accounts show that LSN reserves continue to fall, with the firm having spent £8.8 million on the acquisition of companies such as FE Associates and Learning Resources International. However, revenue streams were around £12 million below the level expected and it is thought that the absorption of staff employed by the firms acquired by LSN has contributed to LSN's pension fund deficit increasing to around £7.9 million.

Apparently, LSN had previously pledged to significantly invest in NEC information technology resources and to 'double student numbers within 3 years'. The decision to sell off the site was therefore unexpected and has led to severe criticism of LSN from a number of quarters, including accusations that LSN has engaged in 'blatant asset stripping'. The previous LSN chief executive has now left the firm, however, the acting chief executive, Ms Yvonne Smithers, has reassured critics that the NEC's future 'is not in doubt' and that it 'would survive within a much leaner LSN'. She also drew attention to the fact that LSN had recently invested £1.78 million in the NEC and had cleared an outstanding mortgage and loan on NEC's behalf.

The Higher Education White Paper: 'Students at the Heart of the System'

The long awaited HE white paper has now been published. The white paper is, in part, linked to the fact that from 2012 onwards, universities in England will be allowed to increase the annual tuition fees they charge to a maximum of £9,000. So far, around 60% of universities have declared their intention to charge the maximum fees.

The stated aim of the white paper is to develop policies that will, despite the threefold increase in tuition fees, create a rejuvenated higher education system in England which:

- Is more responsive to student choice
- Provides a better student experience
- Helps to increase social mobility

Elements of the white paper which are of relevance to the FE sector include the following:

- BIS will make available an additional 85,000 HE places. These extra places will be the subject of competition between institutions. Of these, BIS will allow the unconstrained recruitment of a further 65,000 high achieving students (defined as those scoring AAB or higher at A level). BIS will also create an additional 20,000 HE places for universities, colleges and other institutions which are able to demonstrate that they can deliver good quality HE whilst charging average tuition fees of £7,500, or below, after waivers.
- BIS will consult on proposals for a 'single, transparent regulatory framework that covers all institutions that want to be part of the English HE system' and will review the title 'university' so that there 'no artificial barriers are raised against smaller institutions'.
- BIS will also consult on proposals to 'de-couple degree awarding powers from teaching in order to facilitate further opportunities for institutions to deliver programmes leading to degrees awarded by trusted external degree awarding bodies'.
- The ability of institutions to obtain, or renew degree awarding powers will be simplified. This will be accompanied by a 'risk based quality regime that focuses regulatory effort where it will have the most impact'.
- Employers and charities will be allowed to sponsor and fund additional HE student number places outside existing student number controls, providing that no additional public sector cost liability is incurred in doing so.
- A review will be undertaken into how existing levels of collaboration between industry and higher education can be increased and the decline in 'sandwich' degree programmes can be reversed.
- The white paper endorses the earlier Robbins Report which states that 'courses of higher education should be available to all those who are qualified by ability or attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' (although how this will be achieved in the light of a threefold increase in tuition fees is a little unclear). In order to facilitate improved access to HE, and in spite of the pressure on finances elsewhere, there are proposals to increase the resources of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) fourfold. There are also proposals to consult with the new director on whether or how OFFA's powers should be clarified and, if necessary, increased.
- With reference to the process of applying for university places, consideration is to be given as to whether there should be a move from the current pre qualification result provisional offer system administered by the University and Colleges' Clearing Service (UCAS) to a new post qualification system, with places only being offered after examination results are known.
- It is proposed that a number of New Technology Centres (NTCs) will be established. NTCs will be tasked with developing 'research and innovation strategies to promote knowledge creation, business investment and skills and training'. Presumably, the new NTCs are *not* intended to be the same as the previous New Technology Institutes (NTIs), in the same way that the new 'Skills Accounts' are *not* intended to be the same as the previous fraud-ridden 'Individual Learning Accounts', but these days, I suppose you can never be quite sure.

What's in a name?

Interestingly (to me at any rate), throughout the HE white paper, the term 'student' rather than 'learner' is used. On the other hand, the white paper contains no instances where a university is described as a 'provider'. The terms 'learner' and 'provider' were initially introduced by the late, but not particularly lamented, LSC. They were presumably intended to blur the distinction between the education and training delivered by public sector FE colleges and, (because the LSC encouraged them to access to public funding to do so) the education and training delivered by private sector trainers. In fact, the term 'FE sector' has now been deemed to include both public and private sector education and training institutions. Whilst the terms 'learner' and 'provider', continue to be used by the SFA today, they are also descriptors that appear to be exclusively applied to this expanded FE sector.

I've been trying to work out why I'm personally so uncomfortable with the terms 'learner' and 'provider'. I think it may be because I believe that if someone is able to call them-self a 'student' and to say that that they are attending a course at 'college', it somehow gives them a level of dignity and self respect (which may be denied them in other aspects of their life). Referring to yourself as a 'learner' who is attending a course in the premises of a 'provider' just doesn't seem to have the same effect. And anyway, if schools and universities don't use the terms 'learner' and 'provider', why should an FE college be expected to? Unless, of course, it wants to.

When is a college a college?

Carrying on with the theme of descriptors, any institution can quite legally refer to itself a 'college'. No ministerial permission is required to do so. Increasing numbers of schools are now calling themselves 'colleges'. They are headed by 'principals' rather than head teachers, and refer to their pupils as 'students'. Many voluntary sector and private training organisations also include the word 'college' in their institutional names (e.g. CITB Construction College).

You might argue that this is no big deal. Why would anyone want to object to a secondary school calling itself a 'college'? And some private or voluntary sector colleges undoubtedly do an extremely good job for their students. But on the other hand, the unregulated use of the term 'college' adds to the confusion of the general public in trying to understand the widely differing range and nature of colleges that currently exist. Because of this, it is sometimes difficult for members of the public to distinguish between a multi-sited, multi-million pound turnover FE or sixth form college offering a comprehensive range of courses to degree level, a school calling itself a 'specialist business and enterprise college' and a small private sector IT trainer operating out of a corrugated tin shed in his back garden.

There are other consequences of this lack of regulation. The fact that no ministerial permission is required to use the term 'college' in an institution's name means that, for example, your local massage parlour could refer to itself as a college. This is not too much of an exaggeration. One such institution recently came to local prominence when it was raided by the police and a fair number of the mainly East European staff was arrested. I don't think that this was because they had refused to pay their IfL fees. (If it was, it may have been a little unfair on them, since their clientele couldn't really be described as 'students').

Other institutions calling themselves colleges are just plain 'bogus', in that they have no students at all. They exist for the sole purpose of making money by selling student visas. Their 'clients' are economic migrants looking for a better life in Britain and a safer alternative for entering the country than strapping themselves to the bottom of a container lorry in Calais. Even more seriously, there have been examples of bogus colleges supplying visas for terrorists to enter the country who, having gained entry, move on to other 'colleges' based in the UK that have served to further radicalise them.

But it is a very different kettle of fish in the case of higher education institutions. It is illegal to include the term 'university' (or a 'polytechnic' for that matter) in any institution's name without the approval of the BIS Secretary of State. Even an FE college simply seeking to call itself a 'college of further and higher education' would need the Secretary of State's permission to do so, and those that have tried have not found the process all that easy.

Inconsistencies in the regulatory framework concerning the use of descriptors for educational institutions have led some observers to argue that any organisation seeking to call itself a 'college', or include the term 'college' in its institutional name, should (as is the case with an institution seeking to call itself a university) also be required to obtain ministerial approval before doing so. They also argue that the current 'free for all' approach, which allows any institution to call itself a college, causes public confusion about what an FE/sixth form college is and does, and as a consequence, potentially dilutes their worth and undermines their status with prospective students, employers and other users.

The white paper: HE in FE

The HE white paper will therefore be of interest to those who want to see the status of public sector FE/sixth form colleges raised. This is because it now seems highly likely that those FE/sixth form colleges that can combine the required quality standards with value for money will be allowed to enter the prestigious HE market, and those already offering HE programmes are likely to be allowed to expand the volume and range of the HE provision they offer.

Of course, the HE sector is unlikely to regard any increase in competition from FE as a popular development, but should anyone be tempted to feel any sympathy in respect of this, they need only reflect upon the speed with which most universities abandoned their FE college degree franchise partnerships when the HE funding screw was tightened, and the serious impact this had on the budgets of many of these colleges.

Unequal opportunities

Meanwhile, HE students from Scotland (along with HE students from the rest of the non UK European Union, for that matter) will continue to receive free tuition at Scottish Universities. Against this, the Scottish Parliament has recently resolved to allow all Scottish Universities to increase the annual tuition fees they charge HE students from England and the rest of the UK to a maximum of £9,000. In the case of HE students from Wales and Northern Ireland opting to study at a Scottish University, the financial impact on students will be partially alleviated since the increase in their tuition fees will be met from the budgets of the devolved governments. HE students from England will, however, be required to pay the full fees themselves.

Tuition fees for HE students from Scotland opting to study at a university elsewhere in the UK will be met entirely from the budget of the Scottish Parliament (which, just for good measure, has not only resolved to keep EMAs, but is also considering the reintroduction of a maintenance grants for university students who are Scottish). So three cheers for the Barnett Formula then, and if you don't know what this is, look it up on Google or Wikipedia, and weep.

75% of those affected by changes to FE funding rules in England are women

A recent AoC survey is predicting that of the anticipated 250,000 FE students who will lose the right to free tuition in the new academic year as a result of changes to welfare benefit entitlements, it is expected that around 75% will be women. The survey also predicts that one in ten of all female FE students will be affected by the loss of free tuition.

Average tuition fees charged for previously free courses are expected to be around £1,200, and the situation is expected to be exacerbated by the fact that the new loan scheme for FE tuition fees will not commence until 2013.

Alan Tuckett, the outgoing chief executive of the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) said, 'We have had decades of improvement in the opportunities for women, but now we are turning back the clock'.

And almost finally.....

The construction department of a local FE college was undergoing an external verification of its level 2 wall and floor tiling programme. The external verifier noted that only one student on the course was female and decided to have a more detailed look at her work. As luck would have it, the student was in college on the day of his visit and so he arranged to see her in the college wall and floor tiling workshop. After watching her for a time, he concluded that standard of her work was exemplary. However, he couldn't help noticing that while she was working, she was also singing at the top of her voice, and that her repertoire was exclusively made up of songs such as 'It's a heart ache', 'Holding Out for a Hero' and 'Total Eclipse of the Heart'.

The verifier asked her tutor why this was and the tutor responded by saying that it was probably his fault. He had previously told her that she had the makings of a bonny tiler.

And really finally.....

Since we are now approaching the end of the academic year, I would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a restful summer break, and to say thank you for taking the time to read my newsletters over the last academic year. For those that have done so, I really hope I haven't annoyed too many of you with what must appear to be my increasingly cynical views on developments in FE, and in particular my comments on some of the pointless bureaucracy, the unfairness, the unnecessary regulation, and the seemingly endless stream of top down initiatives imposed on the sector by officials who have probably never met an FE student. My only excuse is that I think I might be turning into Victor Meldrew.

Normal service will be resumed in September.

Alan Birks – July 2011