Success Rate Data: A College MI Event

Purpose of the event:

A full day event was held on the 16th of November 2009 at Aston University, which was attended by 110 management information staff, representing 78 FE colleges (see photo from event below).

The event focussed exclusively on issues associated with the recording of the ILR data that would have an impact on learner-responsive (FE) success rates. Click here for the slides from the event.

It was felt that an event to discuss this topic would be useful given the attention it was generating:

- LSC ILR Fact Finding Review of seven colleges (click here)
- The LSC letter to colleges concerning success rate data management (click here)
- The Ofsted letter to colleges concerning the LSC letter (click here)
- The article in FE Focus concerning distorted success rate (click here)

Therefore, the purpose of the event was to:

1. Outline the context and background to the success rate data credibility issue
2. Discuss data management practices, and agree where further clarity was required
3. Hear from Peter Aston (Quality and Standards Manager for The Information Authority)
4. Write this paper, outlining where clarity was required. This would be circulated for both The Information Authority Board meeting (2nd December 2009) and the new LSC/AoC group being established to work on the issue (date of first meeting to be determined).

Urgency required to resolve issues:

It was clear both during the event, and from the event feedback forms, that there was <u>significant frustration at the lack of clarity or inconsistent guidance concerning the recording of ILR data</u>. Numerous examples were shared by attendees that showed they were unknowingly and quite innocently taking different approaches to the way they recorded data, which would have an impact on success rates. It was agreed that this was totally unacceptable in a sector which relies so heavily on an assumption that success rate data can be used to fairly fund, measure and compare performance (MLPs, Success Factor, FfE, Ofsted etc).

Everyone strongly agreed on the urgency required to resolve these issues, and were thus disappointed to hear from Peter Ashton that although Geoff Russell's data management letter to colleges in September said a group would be established (to be chaired by The Information Authority) to consider the issues, a date for the first meeting had not been set.

Top ten queries from the event, which are significant and require immediate clarity:

1. Should colleges include every learner in the ILR?
The LSC letter states that "For Colleges, there needs to be a learner record in their ILR for every learner and not just those that are LSC funded". Yet, whilst approximately half the event attendees said they were including 14-15 year olds and/or HE Franchised in provision, half were not. In fact, contrary to the guidance in the letter, the 2009/10 ILR Specification states on page 16:

> "an FE college should not return records for learners studying on provision delivered by it on behalf of a school".

Also, one event attendee said that they delivered provision on behalf the council, who submit their own LR and ASL data to claim funding. Should this be included in his LR ILR?

2. Why are colleges required to include non-funded (or directly-funded) learners in the ILR?
Although the letter refers to the "Articles of Government for FE Corporations", most event attendees could not understand why all non-funded courses needed to be included, particularly when non-FE Corporations (including independent training providers, some of which are now owned by colleges) did not have to include non-funded learners. Attendees would appreciate not only clarity (see query number 1) but an explanation as to why all this data needs to be submitted based on a national specification, particularly for short full-cost provision and in light of the new demand-led success rate methodology (which does not take account of non-funded provision).

3. Should colleges include enrolments for learners that never attended?
Whilst this might not have an immediate impact on success rates, it was perhaps surprising that colleges took very different approaches to enrolments for learners that never attended. Approximately half the attendees excluded non-attendees from the ILR (either by excluding them or deleting them completely from their student system). Whilst other colleges included non-attended enrolments in the ILR by coding them as withdrawals with actual ends dates equal to the starts dates (without concern for whether this might still generating funding on very short courses). Clearly, for the average size college these different approaches could alter the volume of data records by several thousand.

4. If a learner transfers from one course to another, what is the new course start date?
Approximately half the attendees were using the end date of the course transferred from as the new start date. The remaining half were using the start date from the course transferred from as the new start date. Significant frustration was expressed, as many attendees had been requesting clarity on this issue since the introduction of demand-led funding in 2008/09 (when transfers no longer generated funding). Taking a different approach here can not only have an impact on funding (e.g. altering the glh for an unlisted course or creating a new minimum attendance period), it can alter the way success rates are categorised (making a course in success rate terms long or short).

5. How should Skills for Life spiky profiles and unplanned levels be recorded for achievement?
There appears to be little guidance on how to deal with spiky profiles, and as a consequence the recording of achievement and use of unitised learning aims was not consistent across event attendees. For example, if a learner passed at a higher level than planned should the learning aim be changed? What if they pass at a lower level than planned, should the learning aim be changed? If a learner passes individual units, how is the full qualification (and contribution to PSA target) recorded as a pass. Finally, at entry level there is only one learning aim, how should passes or failures be recorded for Entry Level 1, 2 and 3? Contrary to the LSC letter, both QCDA and less recent LSC advice appears to support the changing of learning aims:

> "Candidates who achieve the two components at different levels can be awarded the qualification at the lower level achieved (for example a candidate who passes the test at level 2 but whose portfolio only meets level 1 requirements can be awarded the qualification at level 1)." http://www.qcda.gov.uk/6466.aspx

> "Providers may wish to consider recording learners achievement level the same as the level of the lowest achieved unit, as is the case for the Certificate in Adult Numeracy and Certificate in ESOL" LSC Delivering Skills for Life Fact sheet number 9 (May 2009)

6. Can a failure at Key Skills be changed to a pass for Certificate in Adult Basic Skills?

The LSC letter says learning aims should not be changed, yet if a learner is enrolled onto Key Skills, and passes the exam but fails to complete the portfolio, should the learning aim be changed (or transferred, see query number 4) to and achieved Certificate in Adult Basic Skills? It appears from the May 2009 edition of the Skills for Life Fact Sheet that this is what should happen to ensure the contribution to PSA targets are recorded:

> "In order to achieve the full Key Skills qualification a learner has to undertake and achieve an end-test and portfolio of evidence. However, learners who achieve the Key Skills end-test and thus partially achieve the Key Skills qualification are included in the count towards the target. This is because the Key Skills end tests at levels 1 and 2 draw on the same set of questions as the end test for the Certificate in Adult Literacy and Certificate in Adult Numeracy at levels 1 and 2 (also known as the national test)." LSC Delivering Skills for Life Fact sheet number 9 (May 2009)

7. What should colleges do when a learning aim exists, but is not yet fully available?

As stated before, the LSC letter says learning aims should not be changed, yet The Data Service have acknowledged that in addition to the Learning Aim Database (LAD) often being slow and at times unavailable, many learning aims have yet to make there way fully onto the Learning Aim Database (2,506 learning aims requiring updating was referred to in 10th November news item). Event attendees expressed concern at how they can accurately record the learning aim when it is either unavailable or as yet not fundable. Under ordinarily circumstances an appropriate alternative learning aim would be used until the LAD was updated, but this may cause problems now if learning aims changes beyond 7th December (F01 deadline) are queried and/or treated with suspicion.

8. What should colleges do if a learners individual learning plan is altered

Many colleges at the event expressed concern that the LSC letter says a learning aim (and learner goal) cannot change beyond the funding start period (e.g. first six weeks). These colleges believed that if, in isolated cases, a learner's goal was renegotiated as part of their Individual Learning Plan, and that they signed a new Learner Agreement, then the learning aim could be changed (or transferred to an alternative) – such as from a BTEC Certificate to Diploma, or visa-versa. It was felt that some common-sense was required which took account of the **'spirit of the guidance'**, rather than what appeared to be the introduction of strict rules concerning 'transfer or learning aim change windows'. It was also strongly expressed that very few people, including the auditors that had discussed the issue, believe F01 was late enough in the year to expect data and learning aims to remain unchanged and/or in all cases accurate (particularly for programmes with additionally).

9. How accurate does the start date need to be?

Event attendees had been told different things with regard to course start dates. Some had been told by auditors that course start date must be accurate to the week, others to within five working days and others that it must be correct not only to the first class, but to the first attendance. Also, what constitutes a first attendance in terms of authorised absence? Clearly, within minimum attendance periods (such as six weeks) this is important in terms of not only funding, but also which enrolments are included within demand-led success rates.

10. Are data management rules unclear and now getting more/too complex?

Given 110 data professional representing 78 colleges were at the event I felt it was an opportunity to not only discuss the clarity of the guidance, but whether the A51a field would become too complicated and unworkable.

Firstly, of 63 responses to the circulated questionnaire, 55 (87%) did not believe that "the guidance on LR ILR data collection for success rate purposes is clear", adding weight to the urgent need to clarify issues – such as the ten within the paper.

The questionnaire also asked the event attendees to consider a field introduced for LR provision in 2008/09, which will become particularly important as the QCF is rolled-out. This field, the A51a, is referred to 24 times within the 2009/10 LSC funding guidance as it requires the college to enter a percentage representing the proportion of funding they are claiming where a learner already has Recognition of Prior Learning and/or Attainment. Of 62 event attendee responses, 50 (81%) believed it was too complicated and would be unworkable, 4 (6%) disagreed and the remaining 8 did not know. Like the majority of respondents, I am also of the strong opinion that this field will quickly become a significant audit risk requiring additional bureaucracy, and ultimately it will become unworkable (potentially putting the QCF at risk of failure before it has a chance to fully establish itself). Neither The Information Authority nor the Bureaucracy Reduction Group appear to have grasped the significance of this field, which represents the LSCs solution to funding rates for a credit based framework. Below are four A51a specific guidance documents, which demonstrates just how complex this has become (excluding the A51a QCF issues in funding guidance but not the ILR guidance):

- Use of A51a for 25+ Apprenticeships in 2009/10 (click here)
- Use of A51a for Train to Gain (click here)
- Use of A51a for ConstructionSkills Diplomas (click here)
- Use of A51a for Apprenticeships (click here)

Recommendation: The Information Authority, working with the Bureaucracy Reduction Group, conduct a thorough impact analysis of A51a to determine whether its increasing use is appropriate and perhaps more importantly, workable in practice.

Final comments:

- To avoid further confusion concerning success rate recording, the new requirements regarding planned and actual credits for QCF qualifications should be better explained (do colleges understand that the number of achieved credits can exceed the number of planned credits?) In my opinion the introduction of the QCF requires new data training and support.
- Very few event attendees were aware of Annex P concerning data quality, the new data credibility reports nor the introduction of ILR Quality Assessments.
- In my view there needs to be greater appreciation of how external curriculum design can impact on internal success rates, as well as when to record what was planned rather than what actually happened. This one pager (click here) explores the issue for BTECs.

Note from the event organiser and author of this paper:
Until September 2009 it was me, responsible for the data credibility and submission of more than 30,000 enrolments per year. I do not doubt that a minority of colleges have exploited the limited guidance to improve their Ofsted ratings and avoid MLP problems. However, I do believe the vast majority of staff dealing with data in colleges are doing their best to remain within the guidance, whilst mindful to ensure the learners achieve both qualifications and 'real life outcomes'. It is a difficult and stressful job not without significant and competing pressures. I therefore hope the event and this subsequent paper will help those that write the guidance to bring some additional clarity and better support the college management information community.

I have started a forum on *feconnect* "the online network for those working with data in the further education and training system". Please feedback and contribute views there (click here). Also, feel free to circulate this paper, which I have also emailed to the event attendees, the LSC, The Data Service, The Information Authority, the AoC and The 157 Group.

Finally, I would like to thank all those that attended the event, and Peter Ashton for taking the time to update the participants and field most of the queries listed here, which still need urgent answers.

nick.linford@edexcel.com
www.twitter.com/nick.linford

Success Rate Data: A College MI Event
Nick Linford · Special Adviser on Funding and Performance · 29 November 2009 · Issue 1

A PEARSON COMPANY