Call for Evidence - workforce data in further education

Summary Report

January 2019

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1. Introduction

Background to the study

The Department for Education (DfE) wants to support a strong and resilient further education (FE) sector comprising a range of learning providers delivering high-quality learning opportunities for all learners and employers. High-quality, accurate and comprehensive workforce data is an important part of this vision for the success of the sector; the better the quality of workforce data, the better foundation of knowledge from which to develop FE policy.

In April 2018, the DfE commissioned CFE Research (CFE) to manage a Call for Evidence (the Call) on FE workforce data. The Call asks for views on what workforce data is currently collected, what other data might be needed, whether the sector thinks comprehensive coverage[1] could be achieved and the extent to which a mandatory data collection is desirable. The DfE plans to use the evidence to inform further exploration as to how workforce data will be collected in the future. It is anticipated that any changes to the collection and use of FE workforce data will build on and learn from the existing good practice found in the sector.

The DfE wished to canvass the initial views of people working in the FE sector who interact with workforce data in the following ways:

- Organisations who collect and provide data on their staff for internal purposes, i.e. FE institutions and businesses as part of their planning cycle;

- Organisations which collect data on their workforce on behalf of others. Examples of existing data collections include the Education and Training Foundation's (ETF's) Staff Individualised Record (SIR), the Association of Colleges' (AoC's) senior pay survey, and the University and College Union's (UCU's) freedom of information requests, among others;

- Organisations which use workforce data, for instance government departments, learning providers, representative bodies, research networks, and academics; and/or,

- Individuals who are the subjects of data collections, i.e. staff working in FE institutions and businesses.

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[1] Comprehensive coverage in this context refers to data collection which includes all types of FE learning providers as well as all teaching and support staff in regular employment within these organisations.

Aims and objectives

The Call meets the following two objectives:

- To improve the understanding of how the FE sector and key stakeholders collect, provide and use data describing the FE workforce; and

- To identify how workforce data meets present and future requirements to inform the DfE's thinking on improvements that can be achieved in the coverage, quality and accessibility of data held on the FE workforce.

The latter bullet explains the exploratory nature of the Call. Specifically, the exercise is not a formal consultation (although such activity may form the next part of the DfE's thinking). Instead, the Call tests the water amongst those with an interest in FE workforce data, including those who already undertake the complex task of collecting [and presenting] data at the present time.

2. Evidence Summary

The Call collected primary evidence from representatives of the FE sector via a mixed-methods approach. The main data collection tool was a semi-structure questionnaire hosted on the government's consultation and citizen engagement software platform, Citizen Space. A total of 121 people representing different sector viewpoints responded via the questionnaire.

Further supporting evidence was collected through telephone interviews with members of the Department for Education's (DfE)'s FE Sector Advisory Board, other sector stakeholders from unions, membership bodies, one research organisation, the DfE and learning providers. CFE researchers also attended two sector events to conduct short, five minute interviews with delegates ('vox pops').

Respondents were entirely self-selecting and the Call was not a statistically representative sample of the FE sector. Nine in ten of those completing the Call questionnaire represented a training provider and had "some responsibility to collect or provide data on their workforce to [internal teams] and/or external bodies." Provider representation was spilt evenly between those working for FE colleges and those working for independent training providers.

The purpose of the Call was to understand the breadth of views that exist in the sector about workforce data and how such data is, and could, be used. The Call also asked more detailed questions of those already responsible for the provision and/or collection of workforce data, and from those who actively use existing data for policy development, decision-making and strategic planning.

Current value and use of workforce data

Key findings on the importance of workforce data collection

- Nearly all Call respondents said collecting workforce data is important – 88% considered it to be at least "fairly important". Data collection was perceived to be of most importance for providers' workforce planning activities including: identifying skills gaps / shortages; monitoring and planning their workforce; addressing recruitment and retention issues; and planning training and professional development.

- Considering the value to the sector more widely, benchmarking providers' performance was also an important use, or potential use, of workforce data. Such benchmarking could yield value through provider-to-provider comparison, through comparing individual performance against data aggregated into sub-groups of provision, or against the sector as a whole.

- The perceived value of workforce data was reflected in current usage – around seven in ten respondents said workforce data currently plays at least "a fairly important role" in benchmarking a provider's workforce against the sector, the strategic workforce planning of an organisation, and planning continuing professional development (CPD) activity.

Key findings on the scope of workforce data collection

- Existing collection activity covers most types of staff in providers' workforces - at least four fifths of respondents who administer / use workforce data said it is collected for each of the staff categories listed in the Call.

- Collectors and users of workforce data value the breadth of staff covered - at least four fifths said it is at least "fairly important" to collect data on all staff categories.

- In terms of the type of information held on staff in current data collections the coverage varies. According to Call respondents who collect / provide / use such datasets, around four fifths said personal demographic data, salary details or prior qualifications is collected but less than half said they collect details on vacancies / hard to recruit roles.

- A comparison of the type of workforce data collected and its perceived importance identifies an unmet interest in data on vacancies and hard to fill roles – over four fifths of Call respondents who collect / use workforce data felt this data was important but fewer than half collect it.

Key findings on the recognition and use of national workforce data collections

- The most recognised national data collections, according to Call respondents, are the Staff Individualised Record (SIR) and the Annual Workforce Survey (AWS) - 69% and 60% respectively had heard of them.

- Half of respondents who collected or used these two data sources rated them as at least "fairly useful" (51% for the SIR and 48% for the AWS) although a quarter of these respondents said they do not use either source (25% and 27% respectively).

- Internal workforce data sources are considered by Call respondents collecting or using data to be more useful than external collections for understanding sector-wide workforce issues – 61% considered internal data to be at least "fairly useful" compared to 46% for the SIR and 45% for the AWS.

The strengths and weaknesses of existing workforce data collections

- Respondents to the Call and those providing supporting information knew most about the SIR and hence most evidence refers to this specific dataset.

- The key strengths of the SIR is the open, public access to outputs and some datasets which are currently used as the basis for a number of different publications describing the FE workforce. The SIR is also currently used by some providers for benchmarking and comparative analysis to inform strategic and workforce planning.

- At present, the key stated weaknesses of the SIR concerned the coverage of the record. Coverage related to two aspects. Firstly, not all providers complete a SIR data return, and FE colleges are more likely than independent training providers to submit a return. Secondly, Call respondents said the data record from providers who did complete a return was not always complete which meant there were some gaps in the data. Providers said coverage issues limited the analytical value of the SIR and hence its value. Note these limitations also affect the perceived value of other collections such as the AWS.

- Providers' internal data collection was often able to remedy issues of data item coverage and hence the data collected about a provider's own provision was often said to be good. However, internal data often had limited value for strategic or competitive planning because the comparable data on the wider market was unavailable.

How workforce data could be improved

Data collection and timing

- Two-thirds of Call respondents expressed a preference for an annual data collection and that the collection cycle should be designed to minimise the administrative burden associated with the process. Unfortunately, there was no general consensus as to which part of the year was best as preferences differed with the administrative and management processes adopted by each provider.

- Three broad collection methods were stated as preferences:

  - Automated reporting systems draw existing data from payroll or management information to populate a data return. They make use of existing management information systems and reporting methods, but have the drawback of requiring some initial set up time to write the appropriate code to pre-populate data to common templates.

  - Some considered datasheets as convenient and easy to complete. In addition they create a consistent and standardised approach to extracting, collating and recording data even where learning providers used a variety of staff human resources (HR) and management information systems. Their key drawback was the amount of data entry time required if not coupled with automated reporting systems which would populate a datasheet automatically. This data would need to be entered at each collection cycle

and would be especially onerous for organisations employing large numbers of staff.

- Surveys or online methods to collect data were perceived as simple to adopt and administer and could record data not held on management systems easily. As with datasheets, they would require potentially significant data inputting time from provider staff to complete. An additional drawback is the lack of ability in some cases for the data inputter to view all of the survey questions at once to inform what information they need to provide.

- The main method proposed for minimising the data collection burden was prioritising which data was collected. Several Call respondents proposed collecting limited core workforce metrics frequently and less important data every two or three years.

Improving the workforce data

- Around seven in ten Call respondents felt universal data coverage (i.e. data that included all providers with few gaps in the data record) would improve both the quality and coverage of the data return on several levels, notably in: benchmarking providers' performance against their peers; strategic planning; and monitoring workforce changes over time.

- Including all providers from different parts of the FE sector (FE colleges, independent training providers, local authority providers, etc.) would make data relevant, and therefore more valuable, to many more providers in the sector.

- There would need to be some associated changes to achieve this, notably ensuring the requested data on the workforce reflected the different staff composition of providers outside of the FE college group. This would mean using language and terminology more suited to independent training providers and ensuring the record was able to accurately capture details of contractors, temporary staff and specialists such as assessors, mentors, etc.

- The perceived value of a mandatory data collection was the delivery of a collection that, if not perfect, was far closer to a full picture of the whole FE workforce than is currently available.

- Some stakeholders also suggested increasing the breadth of data recorded to include better detail on roles and contractual data, views on why staff join and leave the sector and more data on the qualifications and employment experiences of staff. However, these points should be considered within the context of the many Call respondents expressing concerns about administrative burden.

Implementing improvements

- During the supporting work, some stakeholders suggested that existing data collection bodies, such as ETF and AoC, have worked hard to create solutions to data collection issues and barriers. Ensuring the lessons learned from these experiences was viewed as an important part of any potential improvements or changes to data collection processes. Any major changes should ideally be staged, to smooth implementation through piloting and testing activities. This would afford providers the time to adapt and introduce any necessary systemic changes. It could also provide time to engage smaller independent training providers, give more time to understand their specific concerns and hence design approaches that suit this group.

- Other stakeholders advocated targeted communications activity to "sell" the benefits of workforce data and demonstrate how it can add value to management and planning activity. Call respondents and those taking part in the supporting work felt part of this work could include offering the right sort of technical and administrative support to help providers. This included easing administrative burden via, for example, collective purchasing of HR software and data collection tools, or offering help in managing data quality and checking methods.

Achieving a comprehensive workforce data collection

Views on mandatory completion

- More than half of those responding to the Call were in favour of a mandatory data collection and a quarter were against; the remainder were undecided mostly because they wanted more detailed information on any proposed collection mechanism or approach.

- The key perceived benefits of a mandatory data collection were improving the representation, accuracy, value, and quality of data, and allowing for more comprehensive and detailed benchmarking / comparative analysis. Several union representatives felt a single, mandated collection could reduce the time learning providers invest in submitting responses to multiple requests.

- Call respondents felt that a mandatory census would improve the quality and breadth of workforce analysis and benchmarking because gaps in the data record would be (mostly) addressed.

- From a sector (as opposed to individual provider) perspective, Call respondents felt a census would allow better analysis on comparative performance, skills gaps and wider national, regional or local recruitment issues. Ultimately, better data should result in better FE policy.

- Administrative burden was the major concern, including for some Call respondents in favour of mandatory collection. A number of respondents felt that the sector already faces significant administrative burdens relating to data collection. In the case of small providers, the absence of HR staff could make responding to a mandated collection difficult to achieve.

- When weighing up the benefits and ease of implementing a mandatory data collection there are several, inter-related issues to consider. These include: the amount of data to be recorded, both in terms of the number of staff and the quantity of data held about them; the systems providers already have in place to record workforce data, for example, staff resources, mechanisms, and frequency of collection; and, the quality of data in terms of the breadth and depth of information collected versus its completeness.

- A staged approach to introducing compulsory collection could help alleviate some of the concerns regarding administrative burden.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

Support for collecting workforce data on the whole of the FE sector was high. Nearly nine out of ten respondents to the Call said collecting such data was at least "fairly important." Benchmarking, workforce planning and sector analysis were the principal ways in which respondents currently used workforce data and expected to do so in future. There were some gaps in the representation of current collections (the number of learning providers included and the lack of complete records from learning providers submitting data), and gaps in the coverage of data, e.g. vacancies data.

The Call respondents and interviewees were broadly positive about a mandatory data collection because it could address issues of data representation and coverage. However, there were pockets of providers, especially independent training providers, who were concerned about the consequences of mandatory collections. The central concern was administrative burden resulting from the time and resource implications for staff and infrastructure to provide the data returns. The respondents were in favour of annual data collections but preferences regarding data collection methods were varied.

Consideration: A single solution is unlikely to reduce the administrative burden, however the following elements could lessen the pressure: a multi-method approach to collating data would offer some flexibility to learning providers to use the most appropriate method for their internal systems; a staged approach to introducing changes would enable learning providers to take time to set up the necessary systems; and, a highly-resourced support team could answer queries and quality check data from learning providers.

Awareness of the SIR and AWS is relatively high as at least three in five Call respondents recognised these data collections. However, awareness was not universal (and tentatively lower amongst independent learning providers compared to FE colleges). Half of those responding to the Call found existing collections useful; the evidence could also suggest higher usage amongst FE colleges compared to independent training providers. A desire for better data exists and the utility of existing collections could be improved. Low representation within datasets limits the possibilities for comparative analysis; inconsistent data coverage means data cannot be interrogated to answer the right questions for all. However, many respondents recognised that such limits arise from voluntary data collections as opposed to deficiencies in the work of organisations collecting data.

Consideration: To increase engagement from the underrepresented groups in the existing data sources, for example independent learning providers, develop a communications strategy to raise awareness about FE workforce data collection, demonstrate the relevance of the exercises to non-traditional learning providers, and make evident the benefits of workforce data findings with universal coverage.

Significant development work has been carried out on existing data methods and, in the main, the likes of SIR and the AWS worked for many. Respondents said there are good

lessons to learn from the processes whereby existing data is collected to inform the design of future collections.

Consideration: Draw on the experience of current data collecting organisations to design and implement any changes to the workforce data collection. Organisations managing current collections possess knowledge of what works based on prior development activity, especially in recent times. Work closely with the under-represented groups to ensure the changes are feasible, reflect their resourcing needs and non-traditional workforce characteristics in order to gain their engagement. The membership bodies represented on the FE Research Advisory Board could provide an effective way of gaining collective feedback on any proposed changes and accessing exemplar providers with whom to consult from these sub-groups within the FE sector.

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