

Debate: does the sector ignore employment links and mislead learners?

Last December BBC radio listeners heard on *Analysis* that the further education sector was encouraging young people to take up courses by falsely extolling their employment prospects. A book, *Learning to Fail* by Fran Abrams, repeated these claims. To throw some light on this picture LSIS commissioned Mick Fletcher, an independent researcher, to investigate. Here we present some of the findings and edited excerpts from his report.

Abrams' book claims that:

'...only a very small proportion of 16-19 year olds went from further education colleges into work. Seven out of 10 who completed a college course, the figures showed, went on to do another course afterwards. Just one in 13 actually got a job – any job – after leaving, and one in 12 became unemployed. For this to be the case in what was supposedly the vocational sharp-end of the British education system seemed, quite frankly, shocking.'

According to Fletcher, the BBC got these figures from two sources, provided by LSC. The first was a count of all students on a number of databases; the second was a large sample survey. The employment destination data came from this second set of figures – the sample survey. The usual approach to working out the total number of students progressing to employment would be to scale the sample figures up to the size of the actual student cohort. Instead, the two sets of numbers had been added together. This had the result, Fletcher concluded, of seriously understating the numbers of students progressing into work.

The true picture

Fletcher acknowledges that establishing the true picture is difficult. According to his research, around 40 per cent of FE leavers in 2007/08 continued their studies. Around 35 per cent of young FE leavers went into employment and 25 per cent were, at the time of the survey, unemployed. He accepts that the latter figure is unsatisfactory, but suggests more analysis is needed "to see for how long the 25 per cent were out of work, whether they were disproportionately concentrated on particular courses or indeed how many were simply taking a gap year".

Destination data is one of a suite of measures used to judge college performance. LSC's Framework for Excellence, gives a grading based on the number of 'positive' destinations: 85 per cent and above is outstanding, 72.5 per cent is good and so on. To avoid colleges getting a falsely good grade on the basis of a small number of learners' destinations, they have to exceed a 'quality threshold', a minimum number of learners' destinations reported. When the LSC published the results of the first national assessment of college performance in 2009, 446 out of 449 colleges were scored as satisfactory or better. (Full details of the LSC methodology can be found in the [Framework for Excellence Outputs Guide 2008-9](#)).

Why should destinations data be treated with caution?

Higher education institutions have been collecting destination data for decades and their experience shows some of the difficulties. Fletcher quotes a study by researchers at the University of Lancaster which finds that statistics about graduates' first jobs are not a reliable guide when comparing outcomes from different subjects and that an accurate picture can only be gained from highly aggregated data, not subject level data. This "must be even more true of FE leavers who enter a more unsettled or 'flexible' labour market".

Given this volatility of the labour market and the differences in local conditions, the advice colleges provide for potential students is crucial. *Learning to Fail* claims they are being misled. But Fletcher found evidence that monitoring learner destinations is a concern for most colleges as is preparing young people for work. The range of activities is vast and includes work placements, internships, volunteering, mentoring and practice interviews. But is variable and some providers could still have something to learn, he suggests.

Developing employability skills

Colleges often do much more than provide advice. They take responsibility for providing learners with 'employability skills' such as self management, team working, communication and literacy, numeracy and information technology. Fletcher argues that because these are transferable skills it is both unnecessary and impractical to seek a precise alignment between the courses students take and the available local jobs:

'As many college staff will confirm, hairdressing students make excellent call centre operatives; a course in drama can develop the transferable interpersonal skills so valued by retail employers; and while there are few jobs available in forensic science those who take it acquire high level skills in hard quantitative subjects that are always in high demand'.

Likewise, he cites international studies which consistently report that planning vocational course provision on the basis of an imperfect understanding of the labour market is unwise as well as unnecessary.

Overall, Fletcher found that the data analysis quoted by Fran Abrams and the BBC had serious flaws and that the true numbers of young people leaving FE who go directly into employment was more than four times the level they quoted. He also comments that the charge that FE colleges "are wholly disconnected from the world of work is not substantiated by the facts".

Fletcher concludes that destination data can only give a partial picture of the outcomes from learning. It would, he suggests, be useful to balance the first destination data with some reverse tracer studies – surveys starting with adults settled in stable employment and charting the routes by which they got there.

Evidence Source

Fletcher, M. (2010) *A step towards work or just stuck in a warehouse? Does FE help young people into employment?* Available [here](#)
Radio 4's *Analysis* programme 'Educating Cinderella' is still available on the BBC website [here](#)