Further Education – evaluating reforms – DfE commissioned research

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Summary
The Further Education Reform programme includes a range of regulatory, funding, and policy changes designed to change the focus, efficiency, and efficacy of government-funded further education and skills learning in England. The programme started during the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition with the publication of Skills for Sustainable Growth in November 2010.

The former Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned research by BMG Research, CFE Research and Learning and Work Institute in 2015 into the programme’s progress. Evaluation of the FE Reform Programme 2015 was published in October 2017. The research involved a wide range of stakeholders across the further education and skills sector including funding agencies and regulators as well as leaders, managers and practitioners across a range of providers. The evaluation addresses the full range of the reform programme. The DfE research report provides a helpful and timely overview of changes and developments in the FE sector in recent years.

This briefing will be of interest to local authority members and senior officers with responsibility for or involvement in post 16 education, skills development and economic development.

Background
In 2010, the former Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) published Skills for Sustainable Growth. This document set out priority areas for investment in further education and skills over the course of the 2010-15 parliament and beyond.

The reforms heralded by Skills for Sustainable Growth were developed in two further policy documents produced by the coalition government in 2011 and 2013,

New Challenges, New Chances: Next Steps in Implementing the Further Education Reform Programme (BIS, December 2011) and Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills (DfE, BIS, April 2013).

The key measures set out by coalition government included:

- putting students at the heart of the FE and skills system.
- providing first class advice delivered via a new National Careers Service (launched in 2012)
- a ladder of opportunity through provision of comprehensive vocational education and training programmes
- achieving excellence in teaching and learning supported by Ofsted’s introduction of a new Common Inspection Framework for Further Education and Skills in September 2012 (updated in 2015)
relevant and focused learning programmes
strategic governance models to support a dynamic further education sector based on removing central controls.
freedoms and flexibilities including reforms to simplify the further education sector landscape, reduced bureaucracy and less regulation
funding priorities through a simplified funding system
quality assurance, transparency and data management
recognising the place of the further education and skills sector in the global market place for skills and training.

The DfE’s 2013 research paper Further education and skills reform plan ‘New Challenges, New Chances’: evaluation showed that in the space of just a few years the reform programme was beginning to impact on the sector with 83 per cent of providers who contributed to the research reporting that the programme had affected their organisation’s business strategy and planning.

In the same year Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills (2013) updated the Government’s reform priorities for the sector, recognising the growth in apprenticeships, the sector’s increased focus on the quality of teaching and learning and the progress made to date in the reform of qualifications and systems. It established six main priorities for further reform:

• raising standards – establishing a new sector-owned support body and a Further Education Commissioner to intervene where provision was inadequate with a new administration process for failing colleges
• reforming apprenticeships – with employers playing a much greater role in the setting of standards for apprenticeships and having far greater purchasing power
• creating traineeships – a new programme for unemployed young people to gain the work preparation and English and maths skills required to gain an apprenticeship or to enter the labour market
• meaningful qualifications – signalling reforms to cease government funding for poor quality qualifications
• funding improving responsiveness – funding high quality provision relevant to the needs of employers.
• better information and data – improving the quality of information available to learners and employers about the availability and quality of further education and skills provision in their local area

Evaluation of the FE reform programme 2015, published by the DfE in October 2017, explores providers’ experiences of the FE Reform programme. The intention is that the research findings will inform decisions which will further affect future operations in the sector. The report is a substantial document running to some 300 pages. The aim of this briefing is to provide a summary of the key findings.

Briefing in Full
The first chapter of the research report provides a useful summary of the reforms implemented over the period of the coalition government. The principal changes are:

• the introduction of loans for level 3 and 4 students aged 24+
• reform of the funding of 16 to 19 provision

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General Overview

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the research findings highlighting broad and general themes. The variety of views and behaviours across a wide range of FE providers revealed by the research shows that there is no consensus on the reform programme’s impact and effectiveness. The overall conclusion is that providers are supportive of the programme and are determined to see the sector through this transition process with the underlying principles of efficiency, quality and market responsiveness being widely supported.

Providers report that the programme is highly challenging in terms of its impact on budgets, delivery structures and processes and organisational culture. General FE colleges report a greater scale of challenge as they have been required to re-shape a broad of provision on a large scale, adjust their structures and alter their position in relation to the market. Smaller training providers are faced with tighter more focused and consequently less complex changes in their operation and approach. FE colleges also demonstrate the greatest awareness of the reform programme and its requirements.

The reduction in budget experienced by the sector is a clear backdrop to providers’ views on the reform programme.

The research findings suggest that providers do not see the reform programme as the “finished article” and feel that some aspects will need adjustment if they are to succeed. Some issues are problematic, particularly GCSE English and maths as a condition of a learning programme.

The long-standing perception that vocational FE does not have equal status with school-based post-16 study remains a live issue for the sector. Parents and young people place a premium on the A-level to university pathway and schools place reliance on this pathway as a criterion of their own success. Providers say this is perpetuating the psychological disadvantage of vocational options, and that this is being deepened by preferential funding arrangements for schools, by the raising of the school leaving age, and in many localities by a weak and biased Information, Advice, and Guidance service unable to sufficiently promote the benefits of vocational learning to young people.

Overall providers believe that they have performed well while running to stand still. They feel that change has been implemented well with standards being maintained despite reducing resources, but questions are raised as to whether this can be maintained if further pressures, both financial and non-financial, emerge.

Subsequent chapters set out findings in relation to each of the principal reform areas.
Providers’ overall views of the programme

Providers were asked in interviews for their overall view of the FE Reform programme. Many see it as an umbrella term for multiple changes. Other had a more ‘holistic’ view of the programme as one targeted at key aims. Providers were supportive of the general aims of the programme, but not necessarily supportive of individual aspects or some of the consequences of changes the programme had brought about. Providers frequently reported that they had changed their operations significantly because of the programme’s requirements, more frequently in FE colleges rather than in private training businesses. The most common changes were in overall business strategy, the types of provision offered, and in quality improvement.

A key change leading to development of an institution’s ‘offer’ is movement towards much greater responsiveness to demands from both employers and individuals with labour market information frequently used as a guide to inform the planning of provision. Partnership working with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and other organisations is an important way of being responsive to local economic needs.

Data analysis and providers’ responses indicated shifts in the learner profile because of the national reforms. The proportion of FE learners aged 16 to 18 was increasing but that of learners aged 24 or above was declining. Increases in the proportion of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds were also apparent.

Providers were also asked about the possible impact of further budget changes. The survey suggests that many more providers expect to narrow the range of courses offered than those expecting the range to widen. In qualitative interviews, anticipated changes involved increasing their work-based and vocational offers (including apprenticeships) to respond to perceived government emphasis in these areas, and to replace funding lost from central government.

Reform issues in detail

Loans for students 24+ at levels 3 and 4

Most FE providers involved in the study indicated that the 24+ loans policy has impacted on them, although the nature and extent of this varied considerably. Changes reported include securing alternative funding sources, recruiting staff to support the loans process, and revisions to the learning offer. For some providers the policy has resulted in an increase in learner participation, but for most providers this is not the case and many report a decline in adult participation.

The indication is that there is good take-up of loans for some types of provision, for example, Access to Higher Education courses. However, low take-up of loans by groups of learners, including those from disadvantaged communities, is a real concern for some providers and there is some evidence that the introduction of the loan scheme is leading to a decline in both participation and course provision at Level 3 and above. Some providers are particularly critical of the policy and are concerned about its possible extension.

Very low take-up of loans for apprenticeship provision led to the scrapping of the loans scheme for advanced and higher-level apprenticeships. However, it appears that the negative impact on apprenticeship participation of the policy is still being felt by some providers.
16 to 19 funding reforms

Reforms to the funding of 16-19 provision have resulted in an increase in demand from learners in this age group. FE colleges and training providers report dedicating more time, teaching, and quality assurance staff to their 16-19 provision. Providers have invested in continuing professional development (CPD), staff recruitment; curriculum expansion, and enhanced relationships with schools, businesses and other training providers to boost recruitment of 16 to 19-year-olds in an increasingly competitive environment. Provision for and recruitment of learners aged 19 plus has reduced in both FE colleges and private provision.

The reform process has led to FE provision being significantly revised as organisations try to meet funding, employer and local authority requirements. Provision has either narrowed to meet specific recruitment targets or widened to spread the risks of non-achievement, depending on an institution’s local situation. More generally there have been staffing changes with recruitment, retraining, redeployment, and redundancies experienced across all provider types. Funding for 16 to 19-year-olds is viewed as increasingly accessible and this has led to post-19 learning offers being reduced or even entirely removed in some institutions. Remaining post-19 provision is increasingly employer-led.

Competition for learners has led to changes in several areas of activity including Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), quality assurance, teaching and learning, recruitment practices, and the composition of learning offers. There have been an increasing number of mergers and acquisitions across the FE sector, and this is expected to continue. There is concern that this makes it more difficult for smaller providers to be responsive to the needs of local businesses and partner organisations.

Simplifying the funding system

Simplification and alterations in the FE funding system has led to several changes in FE provision in line with the government’s aspirations for its reform programme. Publicly-funded courses are now more likely to have work-related outcomes, improve English and maths skills, and to be targeted at young adults.

Institutions report developing new systems to meet customers’ increased purchasing power, action is being taken to make provision as efficient as possible while maintaining the quality of teaching and learning. Providers are now working to increase revenue outside of government funding.

The research suggests that there are some unanticipated consequences of this policy reform. The quality of the teaching and learning could be at risk from continued government reductions in funding and an increasing focus on financial efficiencies. Overall the funding landscape has not yet been made as simple and straightforward as was originally intended by the government.

Providers report that they face challenges in implementing numerous funding changes and increasing their own financial responsibility within a context of funding cuts, and that this is taking its toll on staff morale.

Freeing providers from central government control

The research shows that FE providers are less aware of the reforms designed to free providers from central government control than of other policy changes introduced in the last five years. Providers have made changes in provision in line with the spirit of the reform programme, but not necessarily because of it.

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There has been investment in providers’ management information systems as they take on greater responsibility for the auditing of new funding streams and, as is required, to improve the monitoring of outcomes for government funded courses. FE courses and training have been developed to meet the needs of local communities, for example by supporting the learning and skills strategies of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and addressing skills gaps identified by employers.

The impact of the changes to provision designed to free providers from central government control raises several issues. The financial efficiency of devolving responsibility for monitoring performance and funding streams to the local level is challenging as providers need to invest more resources to ensure that systems and processes are in place for the robust management regimes that the new systems and approaches require.

Providers say that high quality teaching and learning provision with reduced of centrally-led performance management is difficult to achieve when attempts to improve are in a context of frequent policy reform and financial constraints. Personalisation of learning to meet individual needs is also difficult as government funding is targeted at objectives relating to specific learning aims, for example improving English and maths and delivering specific types of qualifications, such as GCSEs.

Other strategies, such as LEPs’ learning and skills strategies, encourage the alignment of FE provision to locally-determined priorities rather than centrally-driven needs, but do not guarantee it – for example, where LEPs and providers are unwilling or unable to work together to achieve common objectives.

Removing restrictions enabling new ways of working with other organisations

Providers increasingly see partnerships with employers as a key relationship. Most FE colleges now put more effort into working with employers, and had more and/or closer relationships as a result. Private providers reported that they had been working closely with employers for a long period. The most common ways in which providers reported that they worked with employers included arranging work experience/work placements, engaging through their senior leadership (including governors), networking, and working with employer advocates. LEPs were reported as being increasingly important partners for all providers.

Some providers believe that increased partnership working is due to the FE reform programme. Providers report that they were able to work in partnership before the reform programme, but the reforms facilitated partnership working and provided more incentive to work in partnership and increase responsiveness to employers’ needs.

While a few providers recognised the policy change, the research shows that many providers did not recognise the removal of restrictions in this area as a distinctive element of the reform programme. Many thought that increased partnership working was a result of other changes (e.g. changes to apprenticeships). This perspective is particularly common amongst private providers.

Improving teaching and learning

Improving the quality of teaching and learning was a key element of the FE Reform programme and the research confirms widespread awareness of this aim amongst providers. Providers are supportive of the increased focus on teaching and learning and new staff, systems, and ways of working had been put in place to support improvement. The use of technology to improve the
experience of learning and teaching for learners is reported by all provider types. More than four in ten providers see improvement because of the changes made.

Other key drivers such as external inspection also have a significant impact on the improvement agenda, so it is difficult to attribute changes to the FE reform programme alone. However, some providers perceive that they are moving towards excellence and that some of the reforms had at least facilitated this.

A few providers report a reduction in quality. Challenges had been encountered in making improvements due to funding constraints and significant curriculum reform. Perceived threats to maintaining a strong focus on the quality of teaching and learning include organisation mergers and the competing priorities that arise from this, and the loss of skilled staff at a time of uncertainty for the sector.

**GCSE English and Maths requirements**

The number of learners enrolling on GCSE courses at all provider types has significantly increased with FE Colleges reporting a tenfold increase in enrolments. FE Colleges and training providers are generally supportive of the reforms, but private training providers report a range of responses from full adoption to ignoring the reforms. Despite the widespread uptake of GCSEs, there is uncertainty regarding the long-term applicability of the qualifications, particularly for learners following vocational pathways.

The perceived impact of the requirement is increased competition for both students and staff which has resulted in considerable changes to staff recruitment practices; continuing professional development (CPD); learner recruitment; initial Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) services, particularly in FE Colleges; and, the profile of teaching teams across all provider types. Alongside large-scale recruitment and retraining, both FE colleges and private providers report medium to large scale redundancies as learning offers have narrowed and teaching teams have been streamlined to meet changing requirements.

Some private training providers report making significant changes to their recruitment practices to include or exclude certain learners. Learners with a GCSE grade D who have learning difficulties or disabilities, those with additional support needs and those considered unlikely to achieve a grade C within the time constraints are most likely to be excluded by these practices. Some learners working towards level 1 or 2 vocational qualifications are being prevented from progressing to level 3 qualifications as they have not achieved the required maths and English levels. There is a feeling of persecution amongst some FE providers as they feel the stringent achievement requirements put undue pressure on the sector.

**Changes to apprenticeships**

Apprenticeships are at the heart of the government’s vision for reforming the FE and skills system. By expanding the role of employers in the system, policy makers believe that more robust links can be created between apprenticeships and the skills required in the labour market. This reform has been successful in delivering several key changes:

- delivery models that engage more widely with employers and stakeholders such as LEPs and other local partnerships
more strategic thinking by providers about improving learning quality for their students by upskilling teaching and support staff and delivering more level 3+ apprenticeships with employer needs at the forefront of outcomes

more employer-focussed provision with an emphasis on local skills needs

Providers also express several concerns. Many believe that meeting government apprenticeship targets is a major challenge, particularly in the context of new Trailblazer standards. There is a risk that provision will tend toward apprenticeship volume rather than delivering quality. Bureaucracy remains a major problem particularly for employers involved in setting up Trailblazer standards. While the quality of apprenticeship teaching is improving, and colleges and employer providers are more adept and efficient in ensuring learners gain employer-relevant skills, it leads to a reduction in other learning opportunities, particularly those focused on adult skills.

The broader programme of FE reforms also impacts on apprenticeship delivery. Some providers report a decrease in the number of 16 to 18 year olds available to fill apprenticeship positions and suggested that this is a result of the raising of the school leaving age to 18 with many young people opting to stay in schools or in general FE. Although GCSE maths and English for those without a grade C or above is not a requirement for an apprenticeship, many providers felt there is an expectation apprentices will take this route. Many participants said GCSEs are counterintuitive in conjunction with apprenticeship implementation and delivery.

Better use of technology

In recent years there has been increased use of technology to help deliver teaching and learning and to support learners more generally in innovative, creative and transformative ways. It is also deployed to increase the number of ways in which learners can access resources. Providers report that balancing this with available staff time and recruiting appropriately skilled staff has been challenging.

The extent to which providers have made changes varies. Some have made extensive changes whilst others had simply built on existing practices. Most providers noted that the changes were designed to improve the experience of learning and teaching for their learners, followed by the aim of increasing the cost effectiveness of delivery.

Providers are very positive about the impact these changes have had on their organisation and its learners. While learning materials are more readily available outside of the classroom this had not had a substantial impact on the number of guided learner hours. The availability of technology based learning has also made learners more likely to engage with their learning programme as they are used to using technology in their everyday lives.

Changes to careers guidance services

FE colleges and the private providers report having had little or no contact with the new National Careers Service, and some did not know much about it at all. The general picture emerging is that the National Careers Service is not having much impact. This, combined with a view that schools were not meeting their duty to provide impartial IAG, means that providers believe that IAG provision has worsened since the demise of Connexions services.

Several colleges and providers highlighted that there is now a lack of impartial careers advice for young people. They feel that this is leading to many learners being advised by their schools to stay on into the sixth form and pursue academic routes rather than being given information about the
full range of options available to them. Colleges and providers believe that for many learners this is closing off vocational and technical routes, including apprenticeships. They think that this is impacting negatively on young people, and on colleges and providers who are struggling to recruit to some of their courses.

Comment

A great deal of ground is covered by this DfE publication which reflects on a period of significant change for the FE sector. Reform is continuing as demonstrated by the merging of the Education Funding Agency (EFA) and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) in 2017 to create the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), the implementation of area review findings, the introduction of T-levels and the development of new insolvency arrangements for colleges under the Technical and Further Education Act 2017. The Government has announced that the Act’s two provisions which may have an impact on the FE sector (outside the insolvency provision and the work of the Institute of for Apprenticeships and Technical Education) will commence on 2 January 2018: access to schools by education and training providers, and inspection of careers guidance in FE colleges.

A fundamental question arising from the evaluation is whether its insights show that the reform programme, in as far as can be judged from the reactions of providers to the programme and from available data, is meeting its objectives.

Although there are challenges and problems, and some specific failures, the research shows that the England’s FE system is developing in line with the reform policies. Both colleges and private providers are now more alert to changing economic needs and are increasingly market-oriented. Course provision and the learner profile are changing towards the pattern of provision and profile that the national policy framework anticipates. Providers are making the internal adjustments and external arrangements that budget constraints and new policy framework together demand. All of this is being achieved in the context of what many in the sector would say is a disproportionate reduction in funding for colleges in comparison to the school sector.

Issues and challenges for the sector arise from the English and maths requirements, the absence of comprehensive and impartial IAG in some areas, difficulties in achieving the FE workforce profile needed to deliver on the reform programme’s objectives and the potential negatives of employer driven provision. At their best employer interests are strategic and aligned with strategies both national and local, at their worst they are short term and tactical leading FE provision towards addressing only immediate labour market needs. LEPs have a key role in aggregating employer and community needs and providing longer term strategic vision to support the planning and delivery of well-founded development of FE provision in their area.

Key issues for the sector are a continuing lack of stability for delivery, fundamental inequalities in funding and perceived status in comparison to the school sector and its 16 to 19 provision and new burdens created by some, but not all, of the FE reform programme’s requirements.

External Links

Legislation - Education Act 2011
Education and Skills Funding Agency
BIS - Skills for Sustainable Growth (November 2010)
BIS - New Challenges, New Chances: Next Steps in Implementing the Further Education Reform Programme (December 2011)

DfE/BIS - Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills (April 2013)

DfE - Evaluation of the FE Reform Programme 2015 (October 2017)

Related Briefings

T-levels what they are and implementation (November 2017)

DfE Policy - Post-16 skills plan (2016)


16 to 18-year old participation in education and training – NAO report (2014)

Skills and employment in the age of Local Growth Deals (2013)

Study Programmes for 16-19 year olds (2012)

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