



## Nick Linford: Further education success-rate statistics misleading

By Nick Linford 14 August 2009

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*Original paper headline: Performance regime must focus on the learners' journey, not their destination*

The end of another teaching year brings with it a welcome summer break for many staff and learners in further education. However, the story does not end here for the 200809 academic year since learners will be eagerly awaiting the results of their hard work, and they won't be alone.

Colleges are now busy recording and verifying learner qualification outcomes, keeping a watchful eye on how success rates compare with last year, and on targets and national benchmarks.

Success-rate statistics seem a long way from the classroom, but as a percentage of learners that started and ultimately achieved their qualification, they act as a critical performance measure. They are used in Ofsted inspection reports to inform grades, Minimum Levels of Performance to decommission provision, Framework for Excellence to commission provision, and most recently the funding methodology itself for setting allocations. Is it any wonder that success rates get so much attention and can cause so much fear?

In fact, further education providers have made hitting success rate targets a bit of a habit. When Labour came to power in 1997, just over half (53 per cent) of all learners that started a qualification passed. Each year since, this figure has risen, and in 200708 just over four out of five completed and achieved their qualification (80.2 per cent), exceeding the 201011 target three years early. With the introduction of shorter programmes as part of the Qualification and Credit Framework, this upward trend is likely to continue.

The problem with success rates as a performance measure is that they only count qualifications. At Lewisham College, learners join our courses seeking outcomes such as progression to university, gaining a sustainable job and acquiring skills that make a positive difference in the workplace. Qualifications, programmes or

pathways of learning should be designed with these outcomes in mind, and providers should gain recognition when a learner achieves their intended progression or destination.

There are a limited number of courses for young people and adults delivered by further education providers which do use learner progression and destination performance measures. The Entry to Employment (E2E) programme for 16 to 18-year-olds was introduced in 2003<sup>04</sup> and includes financial incentives for a positive progression, such as into further training or work. There are also a few relatively new and potentially short-term funding streams for adults, such as Skills for Jobs and the Six Month Offer. Both these programmes include targets and financial reward for progression into sustainable jobs with further training.

This approach to recording and rewarding progression and destination outcomes should be extended to all 14-19 adult and employer provision. It would require the recording of both the main intended and actual destination for all learners, which would be used to calculate conversion rates for types of progression and destination.

The intended and actual outcomes for the employer should also be recorded, such as raising productivity. To incentivise high conversion rates they could come with financial rewards, either within the relevant funding formula or as part of national commissioning frameworks. Recording and publishing these conversion rates would also help the public and the relevant government agency to really understand the effectiveness of the learning.

Introducing a new performance monitoring regime is not usually easy, something to which anyone involved in Framework for Excellence will testify. To be successful it usually requires significant consultation, training and determination to use the information gathered effectively. Perhaps most importantly, the collection of data and related measurements need to be simple to understand and robust enough for everyone to have confidence in. This may not be easy, but has there ever been a better time to have the debate?

## **More further education qualifications is not the pure answer**

First, the recession cannot be reversed simply by the delivery of more qualifications. Unemployment has risen by a record 281,000 since May and by 753,000 over the year, reaching 2.38 million in total. To reverse this trend we are using new and well-established links with employers to understand their requirements and deliver the right skills to learners when and where vacancies arise.

In this context the successful outcome from any training should be progression into employment. In a target and performance culture obsessed by qualification outcomes there is a risk that progression into work is lost sight of and that the completion of a qualification could even delay entry to work.

Second, existing target and performance measures are being reviewed and will be changing. These include harmonising success rate calculations with schools and the demand-led funding, a new Ofsted inspection framework and the inclusion of performance indicators such as destination surveys within the Framework for Excellence.

Also, when the Skills Funding Agency and Young People's Learning Agency take the reins from April 2010 they are likely to be asked by their masters to measure investment in further education, at a time of public sector cuts, in new ways.

A target and performance monitoring regime with progression and destination at its core would help us to not only recognise outcomes in addition to qualifications but also help potential learners make informed judgements.

Learners gaining skills to progress into employment will want to know how successful respective providers are at progressing learners into work. Similarly, a learner planning to go into higher education will want to know which providers are most successful in achieving this intended outcome. Ultimately, we want to ensure every learner has the best possible experience, not all of which will be associated with the achievement of a qualification.

While recognising that success rates and qualifications are very important, they must not become a distraction at the expense of other valuable outcomes. New performance-based regimes that reward outcomes based on positive progression and destinations would put the spotlight on our contribution to the learner journey where, especially at the moment, it really matters.

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