

Attending:

Alison Wolf (Chair)

Frank Bowley, (BIS)

Andrew Dickerson (Uni. of Sheffield)

Claudia Hupkau (CVER)

Stephen Machin (CEP, LSE)

Frank McLoughlin (City and Islington College)

Sandra McNally (CVER Director)

Kate Murphy (BIS)

Stephen Nickell (University of Oxford)

Harriet Ogborn (CVER Administrator)

Bev Robinson (Blackpool and The Fylde College)

Nigel Rogers (CEP Manager)

Donna Ward (DfE)

1. Presentation on the proposed work programme of CVER (Sandra McNally)

Sandra McNally started the meeting with a short presentation of the Centre. Presentation slides are attached to these minutes.

2. Discussion:

a. Issues raised in presentation (or background papers)

- (1) Bev Robinson notes that the majority of qualifications taken at her institution (Blackpool and The Fylde College) were Level 3 qualifications. Frank McLoughlin confirmed that this was the case at City & Islington College (80%, with 85% going onto Higher Education). The take away was that there is substantial heterogeneity in the provision at different providers.
- (2) Bev Robinson also notes that Functional Skills at Level 2 in Maths and English are regarded by employers and colleges as good quality and not necessarily inferior to GCSEs. But there needed to be rigour around delivery and assessment.
- (3) Frank McLoughlin notes that the budget cuts will have the greatest impact on the 19-24 year olds. Bev Robinson echoed that the squeeze was on this age range and it demanded attention.
- (4) Donna Ward notes that "churn" - people going in and out of education and switching back and forth between levels of qualifications – makes it hard to say when someone can be considered as having completed their further education, or what they have gained.
- (5) Frank Bowley noted that there is substantial heterogeneity in the uptake of 24+ Advanced Learner Loans by institutions. Some colleges/providers seem to be better at making use of the loans.
- (6) Donna Ward notes that there is a risk in only using administrative data because we can only look at the past, and the analysis may not be forward-looking enough. Suggests to design own surveys. Sandra McNally pointed out that there were surveys included in the data to be used, and the use of experiments would give another perspective. Frank Bowley added that administrative data allowed individuals to be followed in real time.
- (7) Frank McLoughlin notes that it is important not to treat all classroom-based FE qualifications as equivalent, and that there are many well-established routes into work and further study available apart from apprenticeships. He suggests using progression onto higher level qualifications or Higher Education as a measure of success for FE providers. He stated that young people at his college were asking for a route to work (money and training). The CVER work programme has too large a focus on apprenticeships which only involve small numbers.
- (8) Frank Bowley notes that research has to be balanced and neutral. He acknowledges that there will be a large focus on apprenticeships. There will also be a lot of emphasis on the interconnection between FE and HE and progression will be an important issue.
- (9) Bev Robinson agrees with Frank McLoughlin that there is arguably a disproportionate focus on apprenticeships in the research proposals. However they also note that one of CVER's functions should be to define what an apprenticeship actually is and to evaluate government policy.
- (10) Alison Wolf expresses some reservations about the feasibility of project 1.4 as currently set out.

Director: Sandra McNally

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- (11) The Steering Group appreciates the emphasis on finding more information on private providers, their impact and scale.
- (12) Frank McLoughlin comments that project 2.2 is atypical – and doubts it can be scaled up. Employers are mostly not training, he says. The “Rolls Royce apprenticeships” are scarce.

b. Relevant issues not on the work programme

- (1) Alison Wolf notes that the broader function of the Centre should be to develop an overarching description of the sector to explain how it functions, as there is still a lack of understanding of the FE sector in England. Sandra McNally said this would be one of the outputs of the projects, and agreed that it was a good idea to develop a description of the sector, partly using the output and data analysis of the other projects but also taking a broader view. She said it would be possible to do this in the medium term.
- (2) Frank McLoughlin asks the Centre to look ahead and ask the question “What will the VE landscape look like in 2020?”
- (3) Frank Bowley asks for a description of the evolution of the policy area over time.
- (4) Steve Nickell notes that one of his main concerns is the fact that England has not been able to improve its performance in English and Maths and asks whether people who have low level skills can be upskilled and how we can avoid that young people leave school with equally low levels of skills. Sandra McNally notes that one way to do this is to look at cases where people have successfully progressed and achieved at least Level 2 in Maths and English and look at the characteristics of the routes they took. Steve Machin suggests looking at the experience of other countries to see what works.
- (5) Steve Machin and Frank Bowley suggest to look at what other countries did in education policy who did have improvements in basic skills. Donna Ward notes that the programme does not seem to include an international aspect and that CVER’s research agenda should be informed by history and experiences in other countries.
- (6) Frank Bowley points out that CVER should also look at the variation in returns to apprenticeships and other FE qualifications. Frank Bowley believes that an important aspect should be to evaluate the value of the qualifications in terms of pure signalling (wasteful) and actual productivity gains.
- (7) Kate Murphy notes that the employer aspect of further education is under-represented in the current research programme in terms of employer engagement and skills mismatch.
- (8) Related to project 3.1, Alison Wolf suggests that CVER could look at employers making the case for recruiting workers with immigrant visas beyond the EU, using arguments based on skills shortages.

Action points:

1. Alison Wolf will write to Sandra McNally about project 1.4.
2. Sandra McNally will respond to the above concerns about the balance of the CVER programme (following consultation with other node leaders).

3. Data acquisition (Claudia Hupkau)

- (1) Claudia Hupkau gave a brief update on progress of data acquisition. Stefan Speckesser and Adrian Jones (BIS) are liaising regarding linked NPD-ILR-HESA-HMRC data and other important datasets. Sandra McNally makes clear that the provision of the data is crucial in order to start work on the projects.
- (2) Claudia Hupkau is liaising with Kate Murphy regarding Skills Funding Agency data on further education and training providers.
- (3) The participants discuss the issue of the lack of data on private providers and the possibility of linking data on private providers who submit accounts to Company House. Some participants believe that it is unlikely that CVER can access financial and accounting data for private providers this way because many private providers have other business lines and do not derive their entire revenues from skills provision. However, other participants noted that many of the companies providing training do in fact have training as their sole business.
- (4) Claudia Hupkau raises the issue of subcontractors, who are not captured in the funding allocations data. Bev Robinson notes that all main contractors who sub-contract have to submit a register of sub-contractors to the SFA. Kate Murphy and Frank Bowley note that it is likely that no consistent dataset exists for sub-contractors.
- (5) Frank McLoughlin notes that in no other country is the extent of public funding to private providers as large and that many private providers’ sole trading purpose is to make a profit on provision of certain qualifications, noting that these often did not go beyond Level 2 qualifications, and he questions the value of this.
- (6) Frank Bowley notes that a law might have to be passed in order to force private providers to report more information to BIS. Donna Ward asks what proportion of turnover of private providers is from SFA.

Action points:

1. Regarding data access, Kate Murphy will have privacy notes signed off by lawyer shortly.
2. Kate Murphy will establish direct contact between CVER and SFA for data on training providers (register of training providers, funding allocations, financial management: college accounts).
3. Kate Murphy (and Frank Bowley) will liaise with SFA to find out whether a list of sub-contractors linked to main contractors can be provided (spanning as many years as possible).

4. Next steps and reporting (Sandra McNally)

- (1) Sandra McNally notes that she will update the steering group before all meetings with background papers. Minutes of every steering group meeting will be provided.
- (2) Alison Wolf would like to know what plans the management of CVER have to help researchers get to know the sector first hand, and understand the context in which these data sets were created - including how data gets collated at provider level.
- (3) Frank McLoughlin notes that CVER should not replicate analysis that has already been done, e.g. Ofsted.
- (4) Frank Bowley noted that the main contract is between BIS and LSE. BIS expect LSE to reach agreements with the other nodes in terms of delivery. Nigel Rogers proposes to use the ESRC model that is used for reporting of CEP to determine milestones and funding allocations between projects. Stephen Machin shared the experience of the CEE where there has to be an agreed allocation of funds across the consortium that takes into account the commitments that partners have taken on e.g. recruitment. Kate Murphy and Frank Bowley note that the programme will be flexible and that projects and completion estimates are subject to timely provision of data.

Action points:

1. CVER will send background papers and updates on action points before every steering group meeting.
2. Sandra McNally will respond to the question about management processes in CVER, following consultation with node leaders.
3. CVER will send Kate Murphy a draft milestones document ahead of the next tranche of funding.

5. Date of next meeting

- (1) The steering group will meet every 4 months. The date for the next three steering group meetings will be determined via a doodle poll. The next 3 meetings will be arranged at the same time.
- (2) Bev Robinson asks whether the meeting time could be between 11.30 – 2.30pm to allow her to be there in person and travel from Blackpool in a day .

Action points:

1. Harriet Ogborn will get in touch with all SG members in the near future, after establishing the availability of Chair, BIS and Centre Director.



Centre for Vocational Education Research: Steering Group Meeting, 13 May 2015

Sandra McNally



Background – some policy issues within VE

- Most people (>60%) do not follow clear academic pathway (A-levels) post-16 and have some contact with the VE sector.

Value of VE options available?

- Many leave VE with low-level qualification. Unclear whether or not this is helpful to them in the labour market.
- Well thought of VE options are available (e.g. apprenticeships, BTEC) but often what is 'good quality' is not clear and future progression/ prospects not clear (or at least not widely known and easily accessible).

Quantity, Quality and Complexity of Provision

- Very complex system of provision that is not well documented and there are a lot of suspicions about quality (and probably a lot of variation).
- Dual role of FE colleges (VE and remedial education) for different age ranges.
- Private providers: do a lot of shorter courses (e.g. for apprenticeships) and are also subcontracted by FE colleges. Not much known about these providers!
- FE colleges do a lot of remedial education for people who leave school with low education/skills (Is this any good? Does it help people in the labour market?) Funding is for those aged 16-18 (much less available after that; big cuts for adult basic skills).
- Under-provision for people who want second chance post-19?

Background – some policy issues within VE

Employer demand for VE

- What influences employer demand for VE? (e.g. apprentices)
- Can firms be incentivised to care about quality? (in the context of publicly funded training)
- Any other unintended consequences of policies? (e.g employers not caring about ‘basic skill component’ of apprenticeships? Too many separate occupational apprenticeships? Re-labelling of regular training as apprenticeships? Excuse to cut wages of workers?)

Funding

- Who should bear the cost of VE provision? (for different types/stages)
- What are the potential consequences of funding options for take up?

CVER programme: three main strands

1. Impact of VE on individuals, firms and growth
2. Quality of VE provision
3. Individual participation decisions and the costs and benefits of VE

Facilitating Strand: Getting the data!

Strand 1: Impact of VE on individuals, firms and growth

- Relates to the issue: what VE routes are of value and to whom?
- Relevant when thinking of what VE routes should be publicly provided? Who should pay? What to say to young people about value of routes and progression?
- Combination of survey and administrative data
- 4 sub-themes listed at the moment

Strand 2: Quality of VE provision

How can the quantity of ‘high quality skills provision’ be improved?

- Estimating the VE Education Production Function
- Case study of Higher Apprenticeships in Sheffield University
- Importance of Maths and English in gaining access to ‘high quality’ VE routes



Strand 3: Individual Participation Decisions and the Costs and Benefits of VE

How do the costs and benefits of VE influence individual decisions?

- The demand for VE skills and the choices individuals make
- Access to apprenticeships and returns
- How have advanced learning loans influenced uptake on VE courses?
- How does information about benefits and costs of VE influence individual decisions?