

the
informati**o**n
authority

setting data standards
for further education

Annual Report 2009-2010



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Introduction

The information authority was established in October 2006 to set data standards and govern data collection and use for further education and training provision in England, and we were fully operational by October 2007.

We were set up as a result of recommendations in the Foster Report (2005) and the government White Paper “Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances” (2006), both of which identified a need to set information standards across FE and to ensure a more efficient use of data.

We are sponsored by the government’s Business, Innovation and Skills department (BIS). The secretariat is hosted within the Skills Funding Agency and reports to a decision-making board comprising senior members of key FE stakeholder organisations, BIS and DfE. The board meets four times a year and all board members sign a protocol agreeing to work together to deliver *the information authority’s* objectives to reform FE data.

What does *the information authority* do?

One of our main responsibilities is the ownership and governance of the individualised learner record (ILR) – the most comprehensive data collection about learners in further education.

ILR data is used to ensure that public money on further education is spent in line with government policy – it’s used by audit teams to monitor financial probity and Ofsted to measure performance.

In a nutshell, our overall task is to ensure that organisations and government departments work together to collect and use high-quality data efficiently, releasing provider resources to front-line services that can be delivered for the direct benefit of learners.

We review data requests to learning providers in order to improve the quality of the collected data for data users and to reduce administrative burden on providers and learners.

Welcome from the Chairman

I'm pleased to introduce *the information authority's* third annual report albeit with a sense of nostalgia as it is the last that I shall oversee as its Chairman.

One of the reasons that I became the Chairman of *the information authority* board is because of my strong belief that good quality, timely data is the key to further education casting off its 'Cinderella' mantle.

As a former college principal myself, it seems to me that our product and activities are not as valued, or even understood, as those of the other sectors, schools and universities.

This is despite the fact that we provide well over 60% of A Level students with success rates close to 100%, outperforming schools on a like-for-like basis and being much more accountable in terms of drop-out rates.

In the battle for hearts and minds to gain support, other parts of the system have advantages we do not.

Yet we have a resource which they do not possess and which could be used as the most powerful weapon of change. That weapon is information. We need to tell our story in numerical terms so that the overwhelming service we provide to the nation can no longer be ignored.

The new world with its new masters has brought greater demands for accurate and timely data. We need to change our approach to one in which accuracy is top priority and *the information authority* will help with this.

Times will get harder and demands greater. *The information authority* is here to represent the interests of simplicity, accuracy and timeliness in the use of your data. We are on no-one's side, but represent through our board, our protocol, our values and our work-plan, the interests of fairness, effectiveness and common-sense. We will not let the system balloon into a chaotic battleground of ad-hoc requests and we will always be on the side of the most cost-effective and least time-consuming solutions.

I believe that mastering complexity and delivering credible data speedily and responsively is one of the greatest challenges faced by a sector well used to challenges of all sorts. I am confident that, working together to the highest ideals, we can meet those demands and leave behind the Cinderella image.

We can champion your cause more effectively if we can convince others that your data systems are being effectively managed through a defined management process and that its quality is peerless. That is the challenge I leave you with and it is one to which I am sure you will rise.



View from the Head of the Secretariat

I took over the role of Head of *the information authority's* secretariat in February 2010, and the production of our annual report is a good opportunity for me to reflect on the work of the organisation over the last few months. It has been a time of incredible change within both the FE landscape - with the implementation of the Machinery of Government changes, and within the political landscape - with the new coalition government taking power.

Prior to joining *the information authority* I spent time working in the sector, both in a college and for AoC (the Association of Colleges). My view from outside of the authority was one of an efficient organisation managing successfully to reach consensus within the sector and to represent the concerns of providers. The secretariat possesses a wealth of subject knowledge and expertise that enable its employees to understand the data needs of the sector. Also, the data burden study of 2008 was proof that the authority would seek out providers' opinions and strive to act on them. The work of the advisory groups, the establishment of **feconnect** (the online community for all FE data managers and users), and the consultations that the authority run all help to give providers and data users a voice and a chance to challenge and understand one another more fully,

For the past three years we have run a perception and awareness survey, gathering views from the sector about how we are performing. This year one of the comments that we received was "I think *the information authority* is now becoming a bit obsessed about its role - it is only data after all."

Well, perhaps we are a little obsessed, but we certainly wouldn't share the view that it's 'only' data. We believe that good quality, credible data is absolutely vital to running successful and efficient further education and training provision. I hope that 2010/11 proves to be a year in which greater progress is made – we have the opportunity to radically change the way in which data is collected and used within the system for the benefit of all involved.

Finally, I would like to bid farewell to Graham Jones - we are grateful for his skilled chairmanship over the last three years. He has managed many lively and challenging board meetings where all parties have had a chance to express their opinions on behalf of their sector interest group and to shape the decisions that are made about data collection and standard setting.

We will do our best to ensure that the board continues to be supported effectively so that it can give our work strategic focus and we will continue to listen carefully to the voice of the sector.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Graham Jones', written in a cursive style.

Our work over the past year (2009–2010)

The information authority acts as a neutral ‘honest broker’ for the FE sector, ensuring that any business need for data (for example in order to monitor performance, administer funding allocations and assess the effectiveness of policy implementation) does not impose a burden that outweighs the benefits of collection, and that the data collected is fit for purpose.

Without this intervention, data requests for monitoring and auditing purposes have the potential to grow unchecked into a self-serving industry that is unregulated and inefficient.

The Data Burden study commissioned *by the information authority* in 2008 clarified for the first time in detail the concerns of learning providers around the amount and types of data that they were expected to provide and the concerns of data users regarding the quality and usefulness of data being submitted.

Within this, several key areas emerged that we have worked with our partners to improve. Progress has been made on:

- tackling unscheduled and duplicate data requests;
- simplifying funding guidance;
- standardising LSC data audit requirements;
- reducing the volume of data collection required for ESF and Train to Gain funding; and
- addressing shortfalls in guidance for frontline staff.

We have also taken steps to improve the quality of data within the ILR for the benefit of data users and providers – including improved ILR returns guidance for providers; and improvements to credibility reports and the DSAT (Data Self-Assessment Toolkit).

Connexions data – we are working with various stakeholder groups to:

- Identify the future information needs of Connexions services and standardise their data requests.
- Explore the benefits of having a centralised data collection/ dissemination system, and scope such a system.

Tackling these areas of concern has enabled *the information authority* to assist BIS in its target of reducing data burden within FE by 20% (as set out in the BIS Simplification Plan).

Our achievements include:

- Tackling the ‘data burden’ on the sector - clarified issues and implemented actions
- Brokering the harmonisation of FE Success Rates (Ofsted / LSC)

- Improving the individualised learner record (ILR) specification and guidance and improving the timetable (implementing hard closes)
- Commissioning a review of the ILR and managing a subsequent independent study of data flow within the FE sector.
- Setting a standard for the timeliness of Employer Responsive ILR returns.
- Brokering an agreement for the harmonisation of Connexions data requirements.

2011/12 ILR change process

We managed the change process for the 2011/12 individualised learner record (ILR), receiving 38 requests in total from our stakeholders and consulting on fourteen.

A combination of survey data and discussion via our online community, **feconnect**, led to us receiving a record number of comments (over 550) comments from the sector, which we used to inform the recommendations we made to *the information authority* board.

FE Data Management Principles

The information authority also chaired the cross-sector FE Data Management Group, which was formed in response to an investigation into college individualised learner record (ILR) data undertaken by KPMG in 2009 on behalf of the LSC and Ofsted. The investigation uncovered different data management practices in some colleges that could result in inconsistent reporting, so the Chief Executive of the (then) Learning and Skills Council wrote to all providers asking for co-operation in developing more consistent data management practices.

Group membership included provider groups (HOLEX, the Association of Colleges, the Association of Learning Providers), individual providers, funding bodies (the Skills Funding Agency and the Young People's Learning Agency) and Ofsted. The group drew up Six Data Management Principles for the sector to adopt. After wide consultation, consideration of comments from the sector and some amendments, these principles were agreed by the group at its final meeting in November 2010. Also agreed at the meeting were four 'good practice' principles for funding bodies to adopt.

All of these principles were endorsed by *the information authority* board at its meeting in December 2010, and can be found in the ILR Specification for 2011/12.

Priorities for the coming year (2010–2011)

Our main focus will be to support the sector through the changes resulting from the implementation of the government's Skills Investment Strategy and the Schools White Paper. In doing this, we will carefully consider any changes to data collection that are proposed in order to support the strategies and seek only to endorse those that are beneficial to the sector as a whole.

We will also be championing the transparency agenda to ensure there is open access to robust information that will enable the sector to be accountable to its stakeholders. At the same time we will work with our partners to establish and maintain total confidence in FE data.

We will continue working with our partners to remove duplication of data reports by standardising the information needed and the format in which it is collected. It is thanks to this partnership working and to those that work with us so enthusiastically that we have been able to make the progress that we have. This co-operation will be needed more than ever as we enter a time in which public sector efficiencies become more central to the national agenda.

We will be working hard to redesign the way that data is collected, transformed and processed to facilitate a greater reduction in the burden that is placed on providers. .

Our 'business as usual' activities include managing the ILR change process, producing the ILR specification advice and guidance; initiatives to improve data quality and reduce provider and learner data burden; consulting with the sector on data collection and data standards; and sponsoring further research into data burden to capture current issues.

How are we performing?

Results from 2010 perception and awareness survey:

The results of *the information authority* perception survey carried out between June-September 2010 have now been analysed. The headline results are as follows:

- Of the 180 respondents, 66.6% of respondents were from FE colleges or independent providers, with 13.3% and 7.8% being from local authorities and government departments/agencies respectively. Software developers represented 1.1% of respondents and 3.3% were from employers. The outstanding 6.7% originated from “others”.
- 93.8% of respondents answering the question were aware of *the information authority*.
- 95.9% of respondents answering the question felt they had some understanding of the role of *the information authority*. Of this, 77.3% felt that they mostly or completely understood the role of *the information authority*.
- Of the respondents answering the question, 88% felt *the information authority* had to some degree been successful in introducing change to the sector regarding the setting of data standards.
- 79.2% of respondents (67.5% of FE colleges and independent training providers) answering the question felt *the information authority* had a beneficial impact on their organisation in relation to data issues.

Diagram1: How well do you feel you understand the role of the information authority?

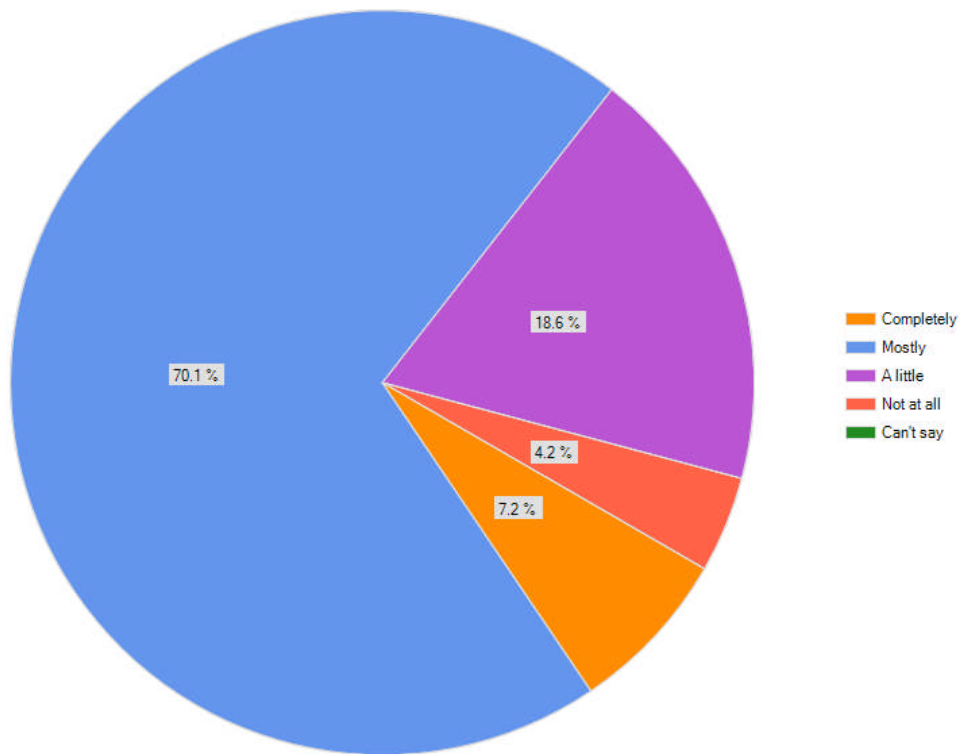
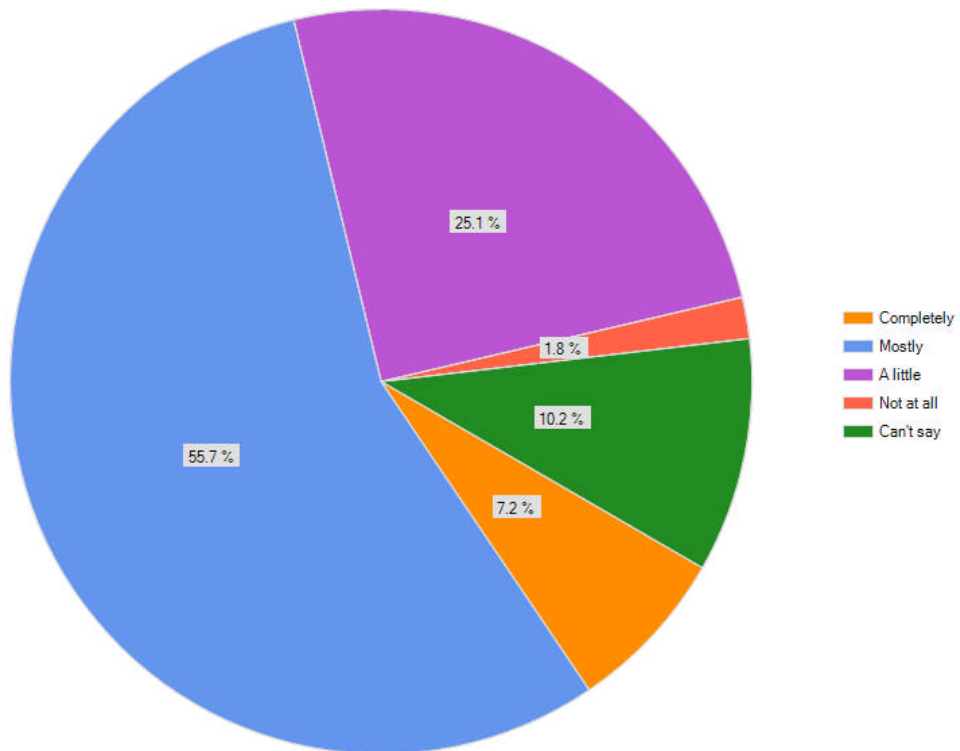


Diagram 2: How successful do you feel the information authority has been in introducing change to the sector regarding the setting of data standards?



Sector views

References from our sector stakeholders

AoC (the Association of Colleges):

“AoC supported the creation of *the information authority* in 2006 and has taken an active role in its work in its first four years. *The information authority* has improved the process for collecting further education data by making the decisions about what needs to be collected more transparent and by providing an independent scrutiny for requests from officials.

“It has been particularly helpful for the authority to have a board involving stakeholders from all parts of the further education system (including DfE and BIS agencies as well as practitioners) and having an independent chair.

“Although there has been progress in this area, there is still much more to do because data collection is still burdensome and expensive without necessarily producing the information that is really needed. This is largely a result of the tumult of initiatives and programmes in the last decade and the complex systems used to fund and regulate colleges and training organisations. The 2010 funding consultation from BIS is a good opportunity to look afresh at one part of the picture, but there are other areas that need addressing.

“*The information authority* is a useful tool in this environment to examine what information is genuinely needed and how to collect it in a simpler, more cost-effective manner.” (Julian Gravatt, AoC’s Assistant Chief Executive / Director of Research and Development and information authority board member)

HOLEX (the national network of local adult learning providers):

“HOLEX, the national network of adult learning providers, greatly welcomes the work of *the information authority* since its inauguration. By bringing together all relevant national agencies and the main provider representative bodies under an impartial and independent chair, the board has proved an effective mechanism for pooling ideas, exploring issues and arriving at decisions which are clearly having beneficial impact on both the timeliness and quality of data returns.

“I and my fellow provider representatives feel we have been able to positively influence decisions made regarding data collection and use, and in reducing the burden on providers...

“As Chair of Single Voice, I would additionally commend *the information authority* as a model of how the sector, from its own voluntary endeavour, can provide effective leadership in areas of technical complexity.” (Bob Powell – Chief Executive of HOLEX; Chairman of Single Voice and information authority board member)

ALP (the Association of Learning Providers):

“From the perspective of the Association of Learning Providers and Work Based Learning in general it is relatively straightforward to attribute value to the work of *the information authority* board and secretariat. The three readily identifiable items are in: reducing burden, particularly of potential new data with a heavy requirement on evidence collection and storage; improving knowledge and understanding within the sub-sector with the opportunity to feed into data discussions the particular issues of this area and the interesting two-way work on data quality.

“As a result of these and other less tangible points the view within the sector of the contribution of *the information authority* and its work has improved very significantly over the last three years. The relative independence of the board members is particularly interesting in the way that it allows discussions to develop.” (Jon Collis – ALP member and information authority board member)

Keeping in touch

We sponsor events and speak at conferences and meetings:

Diary dates in 2010 included:

- Exhibiting at the ALP Conference in Nottingham
- Co-sponsoring the AoC Nilta CIS Conference in London
- Headlining at the summer and autumn College Data Conferences

Our advisory groups

We host regular advisory group meetings for college staff, data users, employer responsive learning providers, adult safeguarded learning providers, software suppliers and own software writers.

The terms of reference for our advisory groups are to:

- Gain feedback on data issues and suggest improvements (e.g. development of the Learner Information Suite);
- Discuss how things are working in practice (problems they raise tend to become ILR FAQs); and
- Comment on proposed changes to data collection and standards (likely impact, data quality issues, etc.)

If you would like to find out about recent meetings, or to join one of our advisory groups please visit our advisory group pages at:

<http://www.theia.org.uk/meetings-events/advisory-stakeholder/>

Feedback from advisory group attendees:

“Good meeting yesterday and very informative – many thanks!”

“I would like to say a big thank you for the meeting on Friday. I found it very informative and well worth attending.”

“Thanks for organising a genuinely useful day of speakers where we can get genuinely useful answers!”

Our online community – feconnect

We set up **feconnect** as a way of supporting colleagues involved in data transformation, collection and reporting by providing an environment for peer support and to provide a mechanism for consultation.

It can be accessed at: <http://forums.theia.org.uk> – use it to make your views known on current consultations, find answers to data issues or problems that may have been raised by your colleagues in other organisations, or submit your queries for our next round of ‘Hot Seat’ guests.

Visits to **feconnect** peaked at just under 2,000 per month in March and July 2010 – both instances occurred when we were running consultations.

Our monthly newsletter – inform

In partnership with the Data Service, we distribute a monthly newsletter via e-mail, bringing you up to date on the secretariat's work, progress on projects and decisions made by our board, as well as other relevant news from our stakeholder organisations. You can sign up to receive inform by e-mailing: informnewsletter@theia.org.uk. Subscriptions to inform increased in 2010 taking our distribution list up to almost 800.

Our corporate website – www.theia.org.uk

Visit our website for the latest news about our work. The website is updated frequently, and you can sign up for web alerts to make sure that you don't miss anything. Visits to our website increased in 2010, making the average number of visits per month just under 35,000. Our highest number of visits was in June 2010, with a record 66,000.

How you can get in touch with us:

- Visit our corporate web-site: www.theia.org.uk
- Join feconnect - our online community at <http://forums.theia.org.uk>
- Subscribe to our e-newsletter by emailing informnewsletter@theia.org.uk
- Follow *the information authority* on Twitter at: www.twitter/theia
- email: cst@theia.org.uk
- Tel: 024 7682 5658

How we work - and who we work with

A wide range of organisations are represented on our board, including: the Association of Colleges (AoC); the Association of Learning Providers (ALP); the Department for Education (DfE) the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS); Ofqual; HOLEX; Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE); Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted); Go Skills; Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK); Local Government Association (LGA); the YPLA, the Skills Funding Agency and provider practitioners.

All members of the board are signed up to our Protocol, which, along with our Terms of Reference, is revisited every year to ensure that it is still an accurate reflection of our core goals and values.

You can find these on our website at:

- <http://www.theia.org.uk/about/termsofreference/>
- <http://www.theia.org.uk/about/protocol/>

Our board members

- Chairman - Graham Jones
- ALP - John Collis
- AoC - Julian Gravatt
- BIS – Susan Pember / Ruth Curry
- DfE - Malcolm Britton
- GoSkills - Robert Spano
- HEFCE - Mario Ferelli
- HOLEX - Bob Powell
- LGA - Tim Allen
- Ofsted - Robert Pike
- Ofqual - Emma Cochrane
- Provider practitioner - Caroline Miller
- Provider practitioner – Ian Pryce
- Skills Funding Agency - David Hughes / Julie Nugent
- YPLA – Caroline Kempner

Our team

- John Perks (Head of *the information authority*)
- Pete Ashton (Standards and Quality Manager)
- Anne Fessi (Community and Stakeholder Manager)
- Rosemary Coleman (Standards Development Advisor)
- Richard Cookson (Data Quality and Improvement Manager)
- Anita Holcroft (Data Specification Developer)
- David Matthews (PA and Team Administrator)
- Selvy Kasparis (Stakeholder Engagement Manager)
- Paul Kelman (Stakeholder Engagement Manager)
- Sharon King (Data Specification Coordinator)
- Lisa Macdougall (Data Specification Manager)
- Peter Millard (Standards Development Manager)
- Anna Nathwani (Community Facilitator)
- Fazia Saleem (Communications Manager)
- Sarah Williams (Data Specification Coordinator)