

Skillful operator

Sally Dicketts CBE, chief executive of Activate Learning, faces the growing pains of government policy on two fronts – apprenticeships and college funding. She tells **Julian Hall** about the charity’s coping strategy

To say Sally Dicketts CBE runs an expansive organisation is something of an understatement. As chief executive of the charity Activate Learning, she was this year responsible for nearly 8,000 students on secondary, further, tertiary or work training pathways. Activate also has a growing commercial arm, offering consultancy to businesses and social enterprises via schemes involving ‘learning companies’ based at their colleges.

The organisation began life in 2003 when Sally Dicketts left her post as chief executive of Milton Keynes College to merge three failing colleges into Oxford and Cherwell Valley College (OCVC, now City of Oxford College) – though the real take-off moment came when Activate was given the opportunity run Reading College in 2010. “The board of OCVC and I felt like we needed to broaden and grow, so we took over running Reading College and then had the opportunity to go into schools, so now the organisation is tiered.”

Those tiers include the aforementioned colleges plus Banbury and Bicester College; university technical colleges UTC Reading (awarded ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted, the first such award for a college of its type) and UTC Oxfordshire; the Bicester School (where Activate is the academy sponsor), and the soon to open specialist construction school Bicester Technology Studio, for which Activate is

the lead sponsor. Meanwhile, also under the umbrella is Activate Enterprise which provides apprenticeships, alongside a number of overseas initiatives.

Though there’s a natural progression from her teaching days to this point – through posts such as head of business studies at a college, and on to her Milton Keynes role – Dicketts says: “If you had said to me as a 22-year-old school teacher I would become the CEO of a £70 million learning business, I would never have believed you.”

Chains of command

With all of Activate Learning’s going concerns, inevitably one of the main challenges for the group is to stay streamlined and organised. As such, Dicketts sees the governance structure as vitally important for her charity, although she admits it can be “complicated and time consuming too”.

“We’re now going to have group executive directors who will be responsible for a school or college and a faculty area [with Activate Enterprise treated as a faculty]. Students come to us on career pathways and so they need to be really clear who they are engaging with.”

Clear chains of command benefit students in another crucial way at Activate – mitigating the effects of government cutbacks. The National Audit Office recently warned that colleges faced declining financial health, with 110 reporting an operating deficit in 2013-

14, up from 52 in 2010-11. And with the lion’s share of Activate’s students on further education programmes, the organisation is pretty exposed.

However, Dicketts says that shared services in areas like HR and IT mean the “quality and cost” of services is being



Sally Dicketts CBE,
chief executive,
Activate Learning



controlled across the group. “Meanwhile, we’re raising standards across faculties, with specialists sharing workloads: for example 30 engineers across the board rather than ten at one college – this makes us more cost effective and means staff can specialise.”

The charity is also relatively well diversified and has won work overseas, so does not rely on just one part of its supply chain. “Sourcing international work helps us get a global understanding of how to improve employability and to get additional income,” notes Dicketts.

Examples of Activate’s work abroad include teacher training in China (focusing on IT), providing accreditation for vocational training programmes in Malaysia, and the development of three women-only colleges in Saudi Arabia in association with GEMS Education Solutions and Moulton College, under the banner of The Oxford Partnership.

With its huge youth demographic Saudi Arabia is a top target market for UK education exports, but observers note that it is a difficult market in which to turn a profit.

Dicketts does not shy away from that. “You’re not going to start making profit until the third or fourth year; we’re in our second year and we were not expecting to do that yet.”

Beyond the finances, there are cultural concerns that make the Middle Eastern foray delicate. Dicketts admits to making “a lot of mistakes along the way”, but

says Activate has learnt from them. The college contracts are also exacting, with providers only getting paid if a student has an “80% attendance record”.

She adds that contrary to her preconceptions, the students are quite mischievous, but a greater challenge is the restriction of staff freedoms: “Staffing is an issue because they are all female colleges; if you’re a woman you need to be fully covered, you can’t walk out alone and you can’t drive a car. That said, once staff get out there they love it.”

Apprenticeships galore

Ensuring mutually beneficial outcomes is something very much at the heart of Activate Enterprise’s approach to apprenticeships back in the UK – a sector which has been in ascendancy of late. The government has committed to creating three million apprenticeship starts by 2020, an attempt to tackle youth unemployment and the UK’s skills gap. And with work based training is its second biggest services line in terms of student numbers, Activate should stand to benefit.

But while supportive of the policy in principle, Dicketts warns of various pitfalls. Echoing concerns recently raised by Ofsted, she admits the quality of apprenticeships is varied and that they “are not as profitable as the government sometimes thinks they are, nor are they quite the panacea they are made out to be”.

She adds that key challenges to the credibility of the sector can be summed

up in one word – flexibility – both the good kind in terms of course flexibility, and the bad, with the massaging of participation figures. ▶

Activate Learning

Student numbers in 2015

Schools: 461
Colleges: 5,645 to date
Apprentices: 1,196
Higher education: c.550

Revenue in 2014-15

£53 million

The charity’s commercial business includes:

- Professional training and consultancy, provided by Activate Enterprise
- Learning companies set up to provide a real professional working environment for students on applied courses
- Professional services to third parties, eg marketing and HR
- Educational contracts
- All self-financed learning, eg that not funded by the government or through grants.

- ▶ On the matter of course flexibility, Dicketts cites the Trailblazers' initiative (a pilot scheme allowing industry to determine the content of apprenticeships) as offering the most pertinent employability options.

"The advantage of Trailblazers is that employers have more engagement with the qualification. You want students trained in their specific discipline, of course, but also in the 'softer skills', those things that give a 16-year-old preparedness for work, and a sense of what work means."

By this she means improved critical thinking, project management skills, problem solving and communication skills. But on the matter of how many students end up acquiring such skills, she is pessimistic. For one thing, she says the government's new apprenticeships levy – a tax on big business to fund apprenticeships – could lead to perverse incentives.

"Once you have charged an employer a massive levy they could reclassify training they are already doing and call it a higher apprenticeship. That satisfies the government who then don't spend extra money and for us as a provider there is no more new money, just a re-badging of training that is already taking place."

Of course, she hopes the three million target can be met legitimately and admits it will only be realised by getting young people to 'buy into apprenticeships'.

"We've done this by getting our schools involved; the employers are there, the quality is there and it is a compelling proposition to work with a leading edge company like KPMG, still get a degree [by way of a higher apprenticeship] and have no debt."

For Dicketts and her team, allowing students to connect with employers is a vital strand running through everything they do. Equally, allowing students to connect with themselves is fundamental. Activate Learning uses neuroscience to look at barriers to learning and what motivates students to learn and Dicketts is a firm believer that fear is the key.

"I think what's unique is our belief in putting learning at centre of everything we do and the belief that the brain is a muscle like any other: use it or lose it. We get students with placid brains, in that they have never used them, and they are of the belief that there are people in this world that are born clever. They don't understand that if they work hard for themselves, and with us, they can be as good as anyone else." ■

