

Click Newsletter

Issue 3, September 2010

Please find below are some of the recent developments in the wider world of FE.

FE sector developments

Comprehensive spending review raises fears of severe cuts in FE budgets

The AoC is warning that spending cuts for colleges will be severe and much worse than was believed to be the case earlier in the summer. The Treasury is insisting that both the DfE and BIS model larger spending cuts than the two departments proposed in their July returns and is refusing to take into account the additional grants received over the last few years when establishing the base line budgets on which the required cuts will be made.

The DfE has been modelling cuts of between 10% and 25%. A 10% reduction implies that budgets will remain flat in cash terms. A 25% reduction means annual 3% cash cuts. This will impact negatively on 16-18 funding per student. It also appears that Education Maintenance Allowances (EMA's) for 16-18 year olds may be under threat.

BIS has been modelling cuts of between 25% and 40% which translates into cash cuts of between 3% and 6% per year. The adjusted baseline will make matters worse and if implemented could result in cash cuts of up to 10% per year.

The figures above imply annual cuts of around £300 million-£400 million in college income, which potentially translates into job losses in the sector of between 15,000 and 20,000 jobs.

The AoC has called for colleges to join a concerted campaign to try to defend college budgets.

Demonstration planned against education funding cuts

At its recent conference, the TUC gave its full backing for a demonstration against funding cuts in education. The demonstration is planned for November 10 and is being organised by UCU and the NUS.

In an interesting aside to this, at the recent Liberal Democrats party conference, the results of a survey of people who voted Liberal Democrat at the last election

revealed that 39% are less likely to vote Liberal Democrat at the next election, because of the party's failure to reaffirm their opposition to increasing university tuition fees.

Building capital funds may be chopped

The former LSC held back about £200 million of the total £2.7 billion budgeted for the abortive 'Building Colleges for the Future' programme in order to meet potential legal action in respect of compensation claims from colleges who had spent £millions on consultancy and professional fees only to find that their building plans had been scrapped.

However, a recent judicial review against the LCS which was lodged by Grimsby College was not upheld on the basis that 'an approval in principle' did not constitute a guarantee of funds. This judgement may yet be appealed by the college.

It was hoped that the £200 million would now be made available for college capital projects, but a spokesman for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has said that the funds are subject to the government's ongoing comprehensive spending review and could be used to alleviate funding pressures elsewhere or could be cut altogether.

Against this, the Minister for Further Education and Skills, John Hayes confirmed that the £50 million reprioritised from the Train to Gain budget for college capital projects, had now been allocated. The SFA has written to 21 of the 91 colleges who had applied for funds, notifying them that they would each receive a 'renewal' grant of £225,000.

In the meantime, capital grants already approved for around 70 private training providers could be blocked after one scheme was challenged for allegedly breaching European Union state aid rules on unfair competition. The Association of Learning Providers (ALP) is working with the Skills Funding Agency to make sure that, as far as possible, the remaining projects comply with European regulations.

FE colleges not necessarily just a fall back for aspirant HE students

A poll of 800 students studying HE programmes in FE colleges carried out by LSIS showed that only 5% of students were attending FE colleges because they had applied for a place at university but had been turned down.

The most common reason given for the decision to take an HE course in an FE college was because the college was familiar to them, and was nearby and easy to get to, with 53% saying that this was the main reason. For 45% of students, the fact that college fees were lower than university fees was the main reason. FE colleges were also more popular than universities with students wishing to take HE courses part time and with mature students.

At the other end of the HE in FE spectrum, work is underway with the construction of Harlow College's 'University Centre'. This has been partly funded by the HEFC in order 'to create new opportunities for higher level studies in areas where there is currently little provision'. HE courses offered in the new college centre will be accredited by Anglia Ruskin University.

UK at the bottom of the league for adult learning

A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report reveals that adult learners in the UK spend only half the time in learning, on average, than do their counterparts in every other country in the developed world. The report also demonstrated an inverse correlation between the time adults spend in learning in a particular country and the unemployment rate in that country. For example, adults in South Korea spent the most time on average (132 hours per year) in learning, but had the lowest unemployment rate (4%).

'Full time courses' of only 16 hours are insufficient for SEN students

Ofsted has claimed that teenagers with learning difficulties and disabilities generally receive too little teaching to enable them to develop and apply new skills.

Ofsted's recent special educational needs and disability review found that it was rare for colleges to offer provision equivalent to 25 hours per week over a 5 day week, although this was the norm outside FE, particularly in schools. In many colleges it was found that students with very complex special needs were only being taught for 16 hours per week.

The report stated: 'Where young people are protected by the Disability Discrimination Act, their rights to additional provision should not depend, as they do at present, on where they are being educated. In particular, young people aged between 16 and 19 should have similar entitlements, whether they are at school or college'.

Independent review into vocational education

The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, has commissioned a review into Vocational Education. Professor Alison Wolf has been asked to chair the review and it is expected that she will present her report and recommendations in the spring of 2011.

In announcing the review, the Secretary of State said, 'For many years our education system has failed to value practical education, choosing to give far greater emphasis to purely academic achievements. This has left a gap in the country's skill base and, as a result, a shortage of appropriately trained and educated young people to fulfil

the needs of our employers. To help support our economic recovery, we need to ensure that this position does not continue and that in future we are able to meet the needs of our labour market.'

He went on to say, 'To enable us to achieve this long term aim, the government is currently developing a new approach to qualifications, considering all routes available for young people, to ensure that the qualifications that they study for are rigorous, relevant and bear comparison with the best in the world. As part of this, I have asked Professor Wolf to consider how we can improve vocational education for 14-19 year olds to support progression, specifically: how vocational education for 14-19 year olds can be improved; what the appropriate audience for vocational education is; what principles should underpin the content, structure and teaching methods of the vocational education offer; and how progression from vocational education to positive destinations can be improved. The review will not be considering the detailed content of specific qualifications, but will be focussing on the overall effectiveness of the vocational offer.'

Complexity blamed for the inadequacies of the new Diploma

Carrying on with the theme of effectiveness of qualifications, the examination board with the biggest share of Diploma entrants, Edexcel, has called for it to be simplified after figures showed that a disappointingly small number of students completed the qualification last year. Just over 3000 students were awarded a full higher Diploma.

The managing director of Edexcel, Ziggy Liaquat, has said that the numbers completing the Diploma at all levels were much lower than expected and blamed its complexity, saying that a simplification was 'critically important'

Nick Gibb, the schools minister said: 'There will be a place for the Diploma as long as there is a demand for it.' Whether there actually will be a long term demand for Diplomas remains to be seen.

College careers advice criticised

Following on from the article in last month's newsletter concerning the future of the Connexions service, a recent report on the Advice and Guidance (IAG) service, commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA), says that advice given in colleges is worse than that given by external providers such as Connexions.

In response, the President of the Institute of Career Guidance, Deirdre Hughes, said that the findings 'reiterated the need for schools and colleges to better formalise their working arrangements with external careers advisors, such as the Connexions service'.

Interestingly, the report was published at the same time as a further survey covering the London and South West regions, also commissioned by the LGA, which revealed that youngsters thought that youth workers were the best people to give careers advice.

Mrs Hughes warned that youth workers should not be expected to double up as careers officers in the wake of severe budget cuts at Connexions. She went on to say, 'It's like saying that careers advisors should do the work of youth workers. They are not trained to do that.'

But in response a spokesman for the National Youth Agency, Jon Boagey, said, 'Young people identify youth workers as a valuable source of advice because of their independence and perceived impartiality.'

'Free' schools

The Secretary of State, Michael Gove, has announced that the first 16 proposals to establish free schools, all of which will have sixth forms, have been progressed to the 'next stage'. These are the new schools which will be 'parent led, community led, sponsor led, faith and non faith based.'

Interestingly, at its annual conference, the Liberal Democrat party has cocked a snook at Nick Clegg by refusing to support the coalition government's free school proposals.

Consultation on proposed college merger launched

The governing bodies of the Royal Forest of Dean College and Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology have submitted a proposal to merge to the chief executive of the Skills Funding Agency. The proposed date of the merger is 31 January 2011. A copy of the consultation document produced by the two colleges is available on the Skills Funding Agency website.