

Sector Developments

GCSE English grades

Actual GCSE English grades awarded this summer differed significantly from predicted grades. However, after being forced to carry out an investigation in the wake of the large numbers of complaints, Ofqual (the qualifications regulator for England) has concluded that 'the standard set for this summer's English GCSE's is comparable with the standard of previous years' adding that the drop of 1.5 percentage points was 'in line with expectations'. Whilst acknowledging that exam grade boundaries applied to the January and June examinations were different, Ofqual nevertheless refused to order exam boards to alter any of the GCSE grades awarded to students in England and has said that 'the matter is now closed'.

Further education colleges have not been unaffected by this. The change in English GCSE grade boundaries part way through the year has resulted in thousands of students in England failing to achieve the grade C in English necessary for them to gain entrance to many level 3 courses. In response to this problem, colleges have been faced with the choice of either persuading applicants who have failed to achieve the required C grade to accept places on alternative lower level courses, or alternatively taking the risk of ignoring normal admissions criteria and accepting students on to courses with a grade D in the hope that they can improve their grade to a C or above at some point before the end of their course. A similar difficulty applies in the case of entry to level 3 apprenticeship programmes where a grade C in English is required. Providers are faced with either withdrawing the offer of an apprenticeship from those failing to obtain the necessary grade C or transferring the students from level 3 programmes to level 2 programmes with a view to fast-tracking them back to a level 3 programme at a later date should the student manage to achieve a grade C or better in subsequent re-sit examinations.

The grading debacle has also impacted on success rates. Some colleges have seen their GCSE English pass rates halved this year, leading to fears that this may have implications for future Ofsted inspections.

The beginning of the end for GCSE's in England?

Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, has announced that the GCSE exam in England is to be replaced by a qualification called the 'English Baccalaureate Certificate' (or, as John O'Dowd, Northern Ireland's Education Minister has called it, 'the English back-of-a fag-packet Certificate').

The English Baccalaureate Certificate (already abbreviated to EBac) will initially involve the 'core' subjects of English, mathematics and the sciences. However, it is intended that the new certificate will eventually be rolled out to the remainder of the school curriculum. The Ebac will not involve any continuous assessment but will have a single, time constrained end of course exam set by one single examination board. (It has been argued that some people will be disadvantaged, 'go all to pieces', when faced with a single end of course examination paper. Unfortunately a lot of these people are the examiners). Contrary to earlier speculation, there are no proposals to introduce a two-tier examination system, similar to the previous GCE O Level and Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE). Instead, it is intended that 'less able' students will be given longer to complete their EBac.

The changes are planned to be introduced from 2015 with the first candidates taking EBac exams in 2017. This means that (assuming the proposals are actually implemented) pupils beginning their secondary school education this year will be the first to take new exams. It also means that anyone with a child already in secondary school might be forgiven for being concerned that the GCSE examinations which their own children will be taking are headed for the scrap heap.

FE Enrolment

Data collected by the Association of Colleges (AoC) shows that at the start of this academic year, 61% of further education colleges were reporting a decrease in the number of full time 16-18 enrolments at level 3 while 54% of colleges were reporting an increase in the number full time 16-18 enrolments at level 2. There is speculation that the contraction in demand for 16-18 level 3 programmes reflects increasing levels of competition from the schools sector arising from the expansion of new sixth forms in schools and academies. There is also speculation that increased demand for 16-18 level 2 in colleges may reflect the reluctance of some schools and academies to provide for post 16 students who may have struggled achieving level 2 courses whilst at school. With reference to 19+ provision, areas reported by colleges as experiencing a significant growth in demand include courses in English and remedial English, with 75% of colleges reporting increased demand for this type of provision and 60% of colleges reporting that they have needed to employ more English teachers in order to meet this increased demand.

HE Enrolment

Meanwhile, in higher education, there has been a contraction of applications for places in English Universities of almost 10%. This contraction has even impacted on the prestigious Russell Group of universities with around 25% of those universities reporting that they still had vacancies. A spokesperson for the group said that higher tuition fees in England 'has reduced the number students who want to go to a good university'. Ironically, despite the overall contraction in demand for places, universities in England should theoretically have been able to expand this year. This is because the government has will allow universities to recruit as many students as they can accommodate, as long as applicants for places have top grades at GCE A level (AAB or higher), or if the university is charging tuition fees of less than £7,500. Nevertheless, the variation in tuition fee levels charged by different universities in England combined with fewer students than expected gaining the top GCE A level grades last year, has resulted in significantly increased competition for students, and in particular for students achieving the top grades. One of the consequences of this increased competition is that Russell Group universities that have never previously offered places through 'clearing' (the system which matches students to vacancies) are now having to do so in order to fill some of their courses.

Commenting on the contraction in applications for university places in England, David Willetts, Higher Education Minister has acknowledged that 'it was always to be expected that there would be fewer applications for places at English universities this year'. The deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg has even gone so far as to publicly apologise for renegeing on his party's his pre-election pledge not to raise university tuition fees.

Higher Education in a room

South Holderness Technology College has probably become eligible for an entry in the Guinness Book of Records by becoming the smallest provider of degree level qualifications in England. The college is, in fact, not a college but an 11-18 school that has developed a Higher National certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND) in Business Studies in partnership with the Edexcel exam board. The school is charging tuition fees of £4,500 per year for the level 5 qualification and students will have the option of topping up their HND to a full degree at another (and presumably larger) higher education provider. The first cohort of 12 students commenced their studies at the school this September

Employer Ownership of Skills (EOS) scheme begins

The 'Employer Ownership of Skills' pilot was announced by the government earlier this year and is intended to provide employers with direct funding for projects that meet their specific skills development and vocational training needs (including apprenticeships). Around £250 million of government funding will be allocated to employers through the scheme, who will then be able to directly provide their own training rather than, say, commission training through FE colleges and other training providers. In an attempt to allay fears that the introduction of the scheme constitutes a 'siphoning off of funds from the FE skills budget to private firms', Vince Cable, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has been keen to reassure FE providers that many of the schemes for which funding has been provided are 'collaborative' and 'will involve FE colleges, as well as private training providers and national skills academies'.

The EOS scheme commenced this month (September) with an initial tranche of 34 businesses being allocated £67 million from the fund. More approvals will be announced in October and this will be followed by a second round of applications from employers for the remaining £183 million. Successful bids are likely to involve some level of matched funding from the employer and the first successful bidders, including Siemens, BAE Systems and Nissan, have said that they will collectively match the EOS grant allocated to them with additional funding totalling around £98 million. However, not all of this matched funding will necessarily be in cash. BIS has confirmed that employers will also be able to count 'in kind' contributions, such as equipment, premises and employee time off for training (all of which can prove notoriously difficult to quantify). Nevertheless, Nissan has pledged to create 14 new training programmes for around 3,000 staff, both within the company and with its suppliers. Manchester Airport is proposing to create a new academy for school leavers that will offer coaching, courses in employability skills and work experience. Rolls-Royce is developing a project to 'increase the demand for engineering skills' and has pledged to 'double the number' of its female apprentices.

As well as the creation of around 11,000 new apprenticeships, EOS funding will also be used by employers to provide around 49,000 other 'learning experiences' such as work experience placements. The various training projects supported through the scheme are expected to lead to the award of around 27,000 vocational qualifications. However, employers say that funding will also be used to pay for training that will not necessarily lead to qualifications.

Role of the Third Sector in delivering Learning and Skills to be researched

BIS has commissioned research into the role of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in delivering learning and skills and in building the 'Big Society'. The aim of the research is to help government policy makers understand the extent to which the VCS contributes to the delivery of learning and skills and how the capacity of the VCS and level of its contribution can be increased generally. Presumably, a bit like the EOS scheme above, this will not involve any 'siphoning off of funds from the FE skills budget'.

The research project is being administered through a partnership of several organisations including the Third Sector National Learning Alliance (TSNLA), the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS)

Apprenticeship Grant for Employers is extended.

Earlier this year, the government announced that employers with less than 250 employees would be eligible to apply for funds from the new Apprenticeship Grant for Employers. The scheme has been given the acronym AGE, which is strange when you consider that recruitment to the scheme is restricted to young people age 16-24. Grants of £1,500 are available for each apprentice recruited. The £1,500 grant is given in addition to the training costs of the apprenticeship framework, which are met by the government in full for young people aged 16 to 18 with 50% of the cost being met for those aged 19 to 24.

The government has now announced that the scheme is to be extended to employers with less than 1,000 employees. Each eligible firm will be able to access funding to support the recruitment of up to ten 16-24 year olds to apprenticeship programmes. The government has also expressed its commitment to making the AGE scheme simpler to use. For example, employers will receive grant funds in a single payment instead of two separate instalments as at present. However, a spokesperson for BIS has reiterated that small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) still remain the 'key priority for the scheme' and added that the government would ensure that 'sufficient funding is made available to ensure that all eligible SME's will be able to claim the grant'.

Holt Review published

Presumably on the basis that you can never have enough of a good thing, the government recently commissioned yet another review of apprenticeships. In this latest review, Jason Holt, (a jeweller and leading 'social entrepreneur') was commissioned to undertake research into how small employers can be encouraged to take on more apprentices. Mr Holt's report has now been published and in it, perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, the main barriers to SMEs taking on apprentices were identified as being 'a lack of awareness, insufficient SME empowerment and poor process'. The report also found that

apprenticeships were 'not given a sufficiently high profile in schools' and that 'better advice and guidance' was needed.

In responding to the report, a spokesperson for BIS has said that, henceforth, government agencies would 'work more closely with lawyers, accountants and other people and organisations that SMEs traditionally look to for advice'. The BIS response to the recommendation that schools should play a more active role in promoting apprenticeships was, however, more restrained, with the BIS spokesperson saying that 'Whilst we agree schools have an important role to play in promoting apprenticeships, and that is why they are now legally required to provide every pupil with information on apprenticeships.....we believe that it should be up to schools, together with local partners including employers, to determine how best to address this challenge'.

Mr Holt was apparently said to be bitterly disappointed by this particular response and has said that he now fears that, as a result, 'desperately needed' changes will not be initiated and presumably in an attempt to console him, Gordon Marsden, the shadow minister with responsibility for FE, said that Mr Holt had 'every right to be disgruntled'.

Personally, I find all these reviews of apprenticeships very exciting and can hardly wait for the next one to be announced. It would be a shame if BIS officials ran out of ideas for commissioning reviews of apprenticeships, so here are a couple of suggestions. How about a review of apprenticeships and their impact on global warming? Or perhaps how advanced apprenticeship programmes could be developed for people wishing to pursue a career in reviewing apprenticeships?

Missing

Last year, over 30,000 apprentice learner records were returned to the Information Authority (not, of course, to be confused with the Data Service) with 'not known' or 'not provided' entries in the 'employment status' box. This would appear to suggest that large numbers of providers are failing to meet, or simply ignoring, government requirements to check on whether apprentices actually got jobs or not at the end of their apprenticeship.

One apprentice's learner record had no entry in the 'employment status' box because halfway through his apprenticeship he had fallen into an upholstery machine. However I am glad to be able to report that he is now fully recovered. (I think I may have made this last bit up).

Not forgiven, not forgotten

The Skills Funding Agency (SFA) has issued policy guidance and criteria for 'the rejection of providers and subcontractors' and has warned that, henceforth, 'the Chief Executive will publish on the SFA website a list of those organisations to whom the criteria apply and in respect of which, the Chief Executive has taken action'. Providers that meet the SFA criteria to be rejected may also be 'removed from the register of training, be excluded from bidding and be prevented from any involvement with sub-contracted provision'. Criteria for organisations being 'rejected' by the SFA (and being 'named and shamed' on the SFA website) include the following:

- Evidence of 'significant irregularities' in respect of the award of qualifications or other accreditation
- Being required to make a repayment to the SFA which is a 'substantial proportion' of total contract value
- Being the subject of an on-going investigation in respect of alleged fraud.

In justifying the decision to publish details of 'rejected' organisations, the SFA has said that 'the intelligence the Agency intends on sharing will aid the sector particularly when they consider entering commercial and legally binding relationships with such organisations'.

SFA proposals for clamping down on contractor 'top slicing' are shelved

Numerous concerns have been expressed that main SFA contractors have 'top sliced' excessive amounts before passing on funds to subcontractors. FE colleges in particular have been accused of 'ripping off' sub contractors, a recent example of which has been an allegation that one college retained £1.9 million out of a £5 million 16-18 apprenticeship contract that it subcontracted out to another provider to 'cover the costs

of administration and quality assurance'. 'Top slicing' at this level has led to accusations by subcontractors that colleges have been engaged in 'profiteering'

All of this has led to proposals that main contractors should be required by the SFA to provide a justification for the amount of main contract funding they retain to cover the cost of such things as 'administration' and 'quality assurance'. It has also been proposed that sub contracting arrangements should be the subject of closer scrutiny by the SFA and that mandatory restrictions on the proportion of the value of a contract that main SFA contractors can withhold from subcontractors should be imposed. However, all of this has now been put 'on hold' whilst representatives of the main parties involved (in this case the AoC and AELP) review the options for eliminating unacceptable sub contracting practices through the self regulation of the sector. The outcome of this review is expected in December.

The Further Education Guild

The Government has announced plans for a new professional body for the further education sector to be called the 'Further Education Guild'. The role and purpose of the new Guild are set out in a recently published prospectus called 'Developing a Guild for Further Education', and include the following:

- 'The Guild will offer institutional and individual membership, both of which will be on a voluntary basis'.
- 'FE providers will be encouraged to take out corporate membership of the Guild'.
- 'The Guild will seek to enhance the reputation and status of the sector as a whole'.
- 'The Guild will be an employer-led partnership and will support strategic planning in the FE sector'.
- 'The Guild will set professional standards and codes of behaviour for members'
- 'The Guild will develop qualifications for those working in the sector and will supporting training'.

The government has invited bids from appropriate external organisations to run the new Guild and, as an inducement, has announced that it will provide funding for 'start-up' costs through the government's £34 million Growth and Innovation Fund. The front runners for this are said to be the two largest employers' associations, the AoC and the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), which together represent most of the 1,088 publicly funded training providers. The two bodies are apparently at an advanced stage in developing a joint bid to run the new Guild, with the central theme being the development of a unified approach to developing professional standards for teaching common to both public sector and private sector providers. The IfL, which recently lost its status as the compulsory lead professional body for FE teachers in the wake of a union boycott, is thought to be unlikely to have any formal role in the new FE Guild. However, both the AoC and the AELP say they would value its support.

Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) status to be retained - for the time being

Alongside the announcement of the creation of the new Further Education Guild, it was also announced that, 'for the time being', the existing qualification requirements for further education teachers are to be retained. Regulations that were due to be abolished in the wake of recommendations contained in Lord Lingfield's Independent Review of Professionalism in FE, state that 'FE teachers are required to obtain QTLS status within five years of their initial appointment'. This requirement will now stay in place 'until such time as the Further Education Guild is established and is in a position to take responsibility for professional standards and workforce development in FE'.

The about turn is apparently in response to concerns about the effect that the removal of the requirement to obtain QTLS status would have on the 'reputation of the sector'. Nevertheless, the move would appear to be counter to developments in the schools sector, where academies are now allowed to employ unqualified teachers who have appropriate and relevant specialist technical, vocational or professional skills. Also, the AoC and AELP appear to be unconvinced about the need for mandatory QTLS qualifications, particularly in situations where a mandatory requirement may deter people who are highly skilled and qualified in their own specialist vocational areas from entering FE teaching

New Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning

As part of the government's first major reshuffle, John Hayes has been moved from his post as Minister for FE, Skills and Lifelong Learning to join the Department of Energy and Climate Change. His responsibilities have been assumed by Matthew Hancock MP, who was elected as MP for West Suffolk in 2010 and was

previously an advisor to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne. Mr Hayes departure has generally been greeted with disappointment amongst college leaders, who saw him as an effective champion of the FE sector. Amongst other things, Mr Hayes has been credited with 'freeing up' the FE sector from over regulation and defending FE against what some observers regarded as the 'creeping micro management' of the sector by the SFA.

The change of responsibilities is also being regarded by some observers as a diminution of the political status of FE. This is primarily because Mr Hayes was a Minister of State within BIS, and this is a higher level position than that being assumed by Mr Hancock, whose new role is technically that of Joint Parliamentary Under Secretary for Business Innovation and Skills and for Education.

Ofsted Chief Inspector gives speech at AoC Conference

Earlier this month (September), Sir Michael Wilshaw, the Ofsted Chief Inspector gave a speech to around 160 delegates from the FE sector at a conference on the new inspection regime, organised by the AoC. In his speech, Sir Michael said that he 'continued to be concerned about the quality of teaching and learning in FE', and added that he thought that some colleges had 'an undue focus on merely passing qualifications without ensuring that learners are sufficiently challenged or adequately prepared for their next stage in life'. He went on to say that he was worried that, on the basis of recent inspection data, there was evidence to suggest that quality standards in FE were declining and that the rate of decline was accelerating. At the end of his speech he asked a number of (rhetorical) questions of the audience. These questions included the following:

- How can the acceleration of decline in standards be reversed?
- Are colleges trying to do too much – is there an excessive multiplicity of courses and accreditation delivered to an overly wide range of different learners?
- Is there an argument for greater specialisation in colleges and more focus on the needs of employers?
- Has the exponential growth of some colleges come at the expense of quality?
- Have colleges given sufficient thought to consolidation before expansion?
- Have federation and annexation of smaller providers meant improvement in provision?
- Have some colleges been more interested in business plans, growth and international partnerships than in ensuring that the basics of good teaching and learning are properly applied in every classroom and every workshop?
- Why do colleges find it so hard to ensure that there is good and outstanding teaching and learning across all of their provision?
- When so many young people leave school with such poor maths and English skills, what can colleges do to raise the quality of provision in these key subjects?
- Why do employers consistently complain that young people and adults do not have the right skills for their business needs?
- Why does the UK lag behind other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states, with 29 of 33 European countries having a higher proportion of young people progressing to advanced vocational education than is the case in the UK?
- Are college governance arrangements effective in driving improvements and helping colleges build their capacity to improve?
- Do senior college managers focus sufficiently on performance management, based on a need for continuous improvement?
- Do colleges serve national and local needs or are they more interested in attracting numbers of students on to 'soft courses' with high success rates but which have little value and meaning in the workplace?

One part of his speech seemed to cause confusion amongst the conference delegates. This was when Sir Michael expressed his concerns at the dangers of prioritising the recruitment of international students to the potential detriment of local students, suggesting that colleges should focus their attention on 'Deptford rather than Delhi' (which could, of course, prove to be a bit of a problem if you college was based in, say, Bishop Auckland). Delegates pointed out that Sir Michael's views seem to be at odds with that in the BIS policy document 'New Challenges, New Chances', which makes specific reference to the role of further education in generating exports (the current value of which is estimated to be in the region of £1 billion per year). In the policy document, BIS says that the government wants to 'ensure that FE is in the strongest possible position to punch its weight internationally' and that 'a new global strategy for FE' was required.

Another student satisfaction website launched

Ofsted has launched a new website called 'Learner View'. The website will contain data that shows student satisfaction with their courses and will rate provider performance on the basis of this data. The launch of the new site has had the effect of causing some observers to question the purpose of the equally recent launch of SFA's own 'FE Choices' website (at a cost of around £30 million) and the extent to which the existence of two websites covering the same areas may constitute unnecessary duplication and, as such, be wasteful of public funds at a time when budgets are being cut. In support of these concerns it would seem the type of questions put to students and the range alternative responses to these questions do appear to share many similarities.

In defending the launch of the 'Learner View' website, a spokesperson for Ofsted said that 'Learner View represents an opportunity for the learner voice to become properly embedded into inspection processes, which is particularly important as we move towards more light touch inspections' and added that the new website constituted 'important steps towards protecting all learners against poor provision'. The ways in which the 'Learner View' website will be used include the following:

- Providers will be required to inform all learners about the existence of the 'Learner View' website by the end of the second day of inspection.
- Inspectors will view and analyse the latest student satisfaction data during the inspection.
- Learner View data will (alongside other evidence) feed into Ofsted annual risk assessments and help decide which providers were inspected and when they are to be inspected.
- Learners will be encouraged to submit their views on the quality of provision to the website at any time, and not just during an inspection.

And finally.....

London 2012 and health education

The spectacular success of the Olympics and Paralympics has undoubtedly transformed public attitudes to sport and fitness. However, I recently listened to a radio programme broadcast on one of the more obscure channels, in which an expert in sports science answered questions from listeners on exercise and diet and, as a result, I now no longer worry so much about being overweight. The radio interview was thought provoking and the answers to some of the listeners' questions are given below:

Q. Can regular cardiovascular exercise help prolong my life?

A. Everything wears out eventually and this includes your heart. Speeding up your heart won't make you live longer. That's like saying you can extend the life of your car by driving it faster.

Q. Should I cut down on meat and eat more fruit and vegetables instead?

A. Cows eat grass. So a steak is nothing more than an efficient mechanism for delivering green leafy vegetables into your system. Eat more chicken if you want to increase your grain intake.

Q. Should I reduce the amount of alcohol I drink?

A. Not necessarily. Wine is made from fruit. Beer is made out of hops and barley which are vegetables. Alcohol can therefore increase your fruit and vegetable intake and help you meet your '5 a day' target.

Q. How can I calculate my body/ fat ratio?

A. Assume you have a body and assume you have fat. In this instance your body/fat ratio will be one to one. If you have two bodies, your body/fat ratio will be two to one, and so on.

Q. What are the advantages of a regular exercise programme?

A. My personal philosophy is: No pain....good!

Q. Are fried foods bad for you?

A. These days most food is fried in vegetable oil. Vegetable oil is oil made out of vegetables and, as we know, vegetables are good for you. In fact if you fry potato chips in vegetable oil this will count as two of your '5 a day'.

Q. Will sit ups help prevent me from getting soft around the middle?

A. When you exercise a muscle it gets bigger. You should really only be doing sit ups if you want a bigger stomach.

Q. Is chocolate bad for you?

A. Chocolate is made from cocoa beans- another vegetable.

Q. Does swimming help you keep a trim figure?

A. Well, if it does, how do you explain whales?

On the basis of this advice, I'm off for a healthy five course meal, consisting of four pints of Banks's Bitter and a packet of pork scratchings.

Alan Birks – September 2012

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