

Sector Developments

Government launches another skills strategy

All successive post war governments have, from time to time, introduced national skills strategies. However, more recently, the frequency with which new skills strategies are being introduced has accelerated to almost one every year. Most of these skills strategies are *national* strategies (which are really strategies just for England, because the devolved administrations develop their own). Numerous strategies are also increasingly being launched for developing skills for different English regions and for different occupational sectors.

A sample of the *national* skills strategies introduced in England over the last decade is listed below:

- '21 Century Skills: Realising our Potential' 2003.
- 'Skills: Getting on in Business, Getting on in Work' 2005
- 'Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances' 2006
- 'Skills for Growth: The National Skills Strategy' 2009.
- 'Skills for Jobs: Today and Tomorrow' 2010 (via UK Commission for Employment and Skills).
- 'Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth' 2010.
- 'New Challenges, New Chances: Further Education and Skills Reform Plan: Building a World Class Skills System' 2011

Cynics argue that no one has the slightest idea if these strategies have actually had any impact on developing skill levels. In the West Midlands, for example, despite the numerous skills strategies that were introduced by the West Midlands Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the region still has one of the highest unemployment rates and lowest skills levels in England. Perhaps understandably, the reaction of many colleges to each new skills strategy introduced has been to simply to ignore it, and many of those colleges that are more conscientious find that just as they were getting their heads around the last skills strategy, the government goes and introduces another one.

The latest national skills strategy to be introduced by the government is called 'Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills' which, if nothing else, serves to remind us that the choice of titles for skills strategies is virtually as limitless as the number of skills strategies that can be introduced. The new 'Rigour and Responsiveness' strategy, was launched earlier this month (April) by Matthew Hancock, the Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, and the main elements include the following:

- Raising standards through a faster, and much tougher, regime of external intervention in failing colleges (see the section on proposals for a new FE Commissioner below). Those colleges judged to be failing will only be allowed time to improve without external intervention where there is 'exceptional' reason to believe that the existing management of the college can make the 'necessary adjustments'. In these circumstances, the college will be expected to complete its turnaround within 12 months, and will be subjected to a 6 month review in order to ensure that sufficient progress is being made.
- Reforming apprenticeships and placing greater emphasis on employer involvement in setting standards and in external assessment at the end of apprentices' training programmes.
- Creating new Traineeships that incorporate work preparation and experience, and tuition in English and mathematics, with the aim of helping more young people to access jobs and apprenticeships.
- Reforming vocational qualifications and reducing the number of qualifications by eliminating those with little uptake, those that 'lack rigour' and those that have 'weak employer support'.
- Investing £214 million in college facilities and buildings. This sum is actually made up of £77 million of new capital funding provided by the government, matched by a further £137 million of investment provided by colleges themselves, either through loans or from their own reserves. This new funding will be targeted at 47 colleges that are either deemed to be in the greatest need of help, or can show that

they can support a specific growth need in the economy, and is in addition to £110 million provided for 56 colleges last November through the Enhanced Renewal Grant (ERG3).

New Skills Strategy, New Commissioner for FE

FE minister Matthew Hancock has added his concerns about the quality of provision in some FE colleges to those of the Ofsted Chief Inspector for England, Sir Michael Wilshaw. Mr Hancock claims that 'nearly one and half million learners were not receiving teaching that is rated as good or better' and that 'this is not acceptable'. In response to these concerns, a new 'FE Commissioner' is to be appointed'. The role of the new Commissioner should not be confused with that of a person who might be found outside the entrance to hotels, calling taxis and opening car doors and perhaps wearing a top hat. This would be a *Commissionaire*. No, the role of the new Commissioner will be to 'protect learners' by rapidly intervening as soon as a college is judged to be failing, where 'failing' is defined as the college falling into one or more of the categories below:

- Being judged 'inadequate' by Ofsted.
- Having success rates that are below the minimum level of performance required (based on 'floor targets' and comparisons with success rates in similar institutions).
- Becoming financially unstable.

The Commissioner will be given just two weeks to investigate a college. At the end of the 2 week period, the Commissioner will report findings directly to ministers (rather than the Ofsted Chief Inspector), and will be expected to identify the range of interventions needed to 'to restore quality to well above intervention performance thresholds, usually within 12 months'. The range of interventions could include the following:

- Conferring 'Administered' status on failing colleges. (This should not be confused with 'Accredited' status, 'Chartered' status, 'Beacon' status, Investors in People status, or anything to do with the Training Quality Standard, although it is perhaps easy to see how it might be). An 'Administered' college would lose its new 'flexibilities and freedoms' and would be subject to significant constraints in areas such as appointing or removing staff, committing expenditure and transferring assets.
- Replacing of some, or all, of the governing body.
- Recommending to ministers that the corporation be dissolved and/or that the college be closed.
- Making proposals to ministers 'for how future provision at the college will be organised'. This could involve removing some (or all) of a college's provision and reallocating it to other providers, including other FE colleges and private training providers. Interestingly, the Commissioner can also recommend that provision be transferred from colleges to academies, free schools and university technical colleges.
- Making recommendations in respect of providing external 'enhanced support' for colleges deemed to 'require improvement', but thought not have the internal management capacity needed to deliver it.

As evidence of how keen the government is to get on with this, a Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) spokesperson said, 'we shortly will be seeking expressions of interest for both this role (the FE Commissioner) and for a group of FE advisers who will support the Commissioner'. This has led to speculation that an appointment may be made very quickly. The Association of Colleges (AoC) and the University and College Union (UCU) have both said that the government's plans were 'too rushed' and that two weeks was too short a time period to conduct an investigation, particularly given the potentially serious consequences for a college being investigated. Others have expressed concerns that there may be confusion about how the FE Commissioner's role will be aligned with that of Ofsted and other FE regulatory bodies. In response to these concerns, the BIS spokesperson said, 'we will shortly be meeting with Ofsted, the SFA and with FE sector representatives to ensure there is clarity over respective roles'. The spokesperson went on to say 'we will communicate fuller information on how arrangements will work *after* the new commissioner has been appointed'.

Change of tack brings 'TechBacc' back on track

No doubt wanting to steal the thunder of Ed Miliband, Lord Adonis and Lord Baker, and apparently undaunted by unmitigated failure of the last Diploma scheme, the Minister for Education, Michael Gove, has announced that a new Technical Baccalaureate (TechBacc) will be launched in England in September 2014. The TechBacc will be targeted at young people aged 16-19, and will be comprised of the following:

- A high-quality Level 3 vocational qualification. The Government will publish a list of those courses that can be included in the TechBacc towards the end of this year.
- A level 3 'core mathematics' qualification (e.g. AS level maths or equivalent). A list of acceptable core mathematics qualifications will be published by the Department for Education (DfE) 'in due course'.
- An extended project 'that will develop and test students' skills in extended writing, communication, research, and self-discipline and self-motivation'.

Performance in the TechBacc will be included in the college and school sixth form league tables in 2017.

Commenting on the launch, FE minister, Matthew Hancock said that the TechBacc would 'give bright young people aspiring to a vocational career a first-class alternative to the more traditional GCE A level route' and went on to say that this would help 'ensure that they have the technical ability that employers want'. A DfE spokesperson added that 'the TechBacc represented the final stages in the government's work to implement, in full, the 27 recommendations contained in the Wolf review of vocational education'.

The TechBacc proposal has been generally welcomed by employers but has received more of an ambivalent response from those in the FE sector. Some critics have expressed concerns that the TechBacc is primarily a means of helping to establish schools and academies as mainstream providers of full time vocational education. Others have argued that Professor Wolf would have done better to push for an improvement in the teaching of English and maths in schools, so that colleges would not need to spend so much time on providing post 16 students with remedial English and maths support before they could move them on to more advanced technical and vocational study.

More Free Schools and University Technical Colleges (UTCs) to open in England

Last month (March) the government announced that a further 13 new UTCs will open from September 2014. They join the 27 UTC's preparing to open and the 5 that are currently open. Earlier this month (April) the government also announced that a further 13 new Studio Schools will open from September 2014. Currently, there are 15 Studio Schools preparing to open and 16 that are open.

Schools that want to establish sixth forms should be judged by Ofsted as 'good' or better

Martin Doel, the chief executive of the AoC has written to Michael Gove, asking him to require that all secondary schools proposing to open a new sixth form should have 'good' or 'outstanding' Ofsted grades, before being granted permission to do so. Mr Doel argues that, since colleges are required to be judged as 'good' or better by Ofsted before they are allowed to recruit 14-16 year olds, the same criterion should be applied to those schools and academies that want to open sixth forms. Mr Doel argues that this would be consistent with the government's policy objective of ensuring that all educational provision is good or better. He has been supported in his efforts by David Igoe, the chief executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association, who said that Mr Doel's request was both 'logical and fair'. In response, a DfE spokesperson said that proposals for new sixth forms were unlikely to be approved 'if there was any doubt about standards', but added that ministers 'were now considering whether any modifications needed to be made to the approval process for a range of school changes, including the addition of a sixth form'

Call for action to ensure that schools provided impartial post 16 advice and guidance

The continuing fall in 16-18 apprenticeships (see section below) has resulted in claims that schools that are failing to fulfil their statutory duty to explain the post 16 vocational options available to their pupils, and are instead putting pressure on them to stay on at school. In support of this, a spokesperson for the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) has alleged that 'schools are now using the introduction of Raising the Participation Age (RPA) as an excuse to fill their sixth forms without offering impartial advice about other post 16 choices'. These criticisms come in the wake of the publication of a House of Commons Education Select Committee report that concludes that a significant number of schools 'put their own interests ahead of that of their pupils, restricted access to other education providers and made the filling of their own sixth form places more of a priority than their statutory duty to provide independent and impartial advice and guidance for their pupils'.

In response to this, a spokesperson for the Department for Education (DfE) has argued that the changes to the way in which careers advice is now provided 'needed more time to bed in and evolve' and went on to say that 'the Select Committee inquiry was conducted after the new system had only been in place for one term'. The spokesperson added that Ofsted would be conducting a review of careers guidance and that the government would consider the Select Committee report alongside Ofsted's findings, 'rather than rush into making any immediate changes at a time when schools were still evolving their careers programmes to best meet their new responsibilities'. An AoC spokesperson said that this response was 'disappointing'.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

(I think that this is Latin for 'who guards the guardians'. I'm just trying to add a bit of intellectual gravitas and high class academic nuance to the newsletter.)

Possibly being a bit miffed at not being able to boss the new FE Commissioner about, Sir Michael Wilshaw has now turned his attention to the pre-school sector and says that almost a quarter of a million children are being let down by nurseries (including those in FE colleges) which do not provide childcare that is good or better. Because of this, Sir Michael is proposing a major overhaul of early years' education in England which could see failing nurseries closed down if they do not rapidly improve. The head of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, which works through a network of regional offices and local centres to support pre-school provision in England, has responded to Sir Michael's criticisms, by agreeing with him that all pre-school children are entitled to high quality care. But she then made the point that providers are also 'entitled to be subject to an inspection regime which is of the highest quality and which inspires confidence in the judgements' made. She went on to say that 'although there were some very good Ofsted inspectors, this was not necessarily always the case', and that 'some inspectors lacked the professional competencies normally expected in a person carrying out such an important role'.

Those working in other education sectors and, perhaps those working in FE in particular, will recognise this as a view that is widely held, but rarely stated so openly. It also raises once again the question of how robust Ofsted's own quality assurance processes are, and who has ultimate responsibility for checking that they are fit for purpose and continue to remain so.

Overall apprenticeship numbers in England continue to fall

Provisional figures recently released by the government show that there has been a 12% decline in the number of 16-18 apprenticeship starts in 2012/13, compared with the same period in 2011/12. Against this, there has been a 6.5% rise in the number of 19-24 apprenticeship starts over the same period. Nevertheless, the data shows that, across all age ranges, there has been a 4.5% decrease in the total number of apprenticeship starts. Commenting particularly on the continuing fall in 16-18 apprenticeship starts, a spokesperson for BIS said, '16 and 17 year olds face tough competition to secure apprenticeships in a difficult economic climate' and added that the government was 'providing grants to encourage smaller

employers to take on young apprentices'. The spokesperson went on to say that the 'Traineeships would help give more young people the skills and experience they need to help secure a job or apprenticeship'.

Progression of level 3 apprentices to higher education

BIS has recently published a research report on the proportion of apprentices on level 3 programmes who progress to higher education (HE). The research tracked framework achievers in the 2004/05 apprentice cohort to 2011/12 and shows that, over the 7 year period, 15.4% of the cohort progressed to HE. The research also showed that of those that progressed to HE:

- 56% went on to study HE programmes in FE colleges
- 44% went on to study at a university.
- 78% studied on part-time HE programmes.
- 3% had HE experience prior to their apprenticeship, either having started an HE course but not completed it, or having achieved an HE qualification and then had subsequently taken up a level 3 apprenticeship.
- 70% of those who progressed to HE did so within three years of starting their apprenticeship
- Younger apprentices who progressed to HE were more likely to do so within 3 years of starting their apprenticeship.

In addition, the BIS research revealed that for apprentices progressing from level 3 programmes:

- 53% of the 2009/10 cohort had previously been intermediate apprentices and that of these, 8% went on to HE.
- Between 2004/5 and 2008/9, 5 apprentice cohorts were tracked over the 3 year period using a 'like for like' trend analysis. The total number of level 3 apprentices progressing to HE over the 3 years in question increased from 2,860 to 3,480.
- In terms of progression to HE relative to the size of apprentice cohort, the overall progression rate has fallen from 10.4% in 2004/05 to 8.1% in 2008/09. The reduction is partly explained by the significant increase in the numbers of apprentices aged 25+ over the 3 year period, with members of this age group normally being less likely to progress to HE.

Higher apprentices are the 'most employable'

Meanwhile another survey, this time commissioned by the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS), reveals that firms believe that students who have completed higher apprenticeship programmes are the 'most employable'. Firms rated graduates as the next 'most employable, followed by advanced apprentices and then intermediate apprentices. Young people with just GCSE's or GCE A levels were rated as the 'least employable'; with employers stating that they preferred young people to have Level 2 and Level 3 vocational qualifications instead. Responding to the survey findings, a spokesperson for PricewaterhouseCoopers said that, 'for talented students who are clear about their career path and want to get straight into work, higher apprenticeships offer a very real opportunity', and added that that the firm had employed 31 higher apprentices last year and plans to recruit a further 70 this year.

Many apprentices continue to be underpaid

With effect from October this year, the national minimum wage will be increased by 12p per hour to £6.31 for adults, and by 5p to £5.03 per hour for 18-20 year olds. Minimum pay rates for apprentices aged 16 and 17 will be increased by 3p to £2.68 per hour. However, a recent Low Pay Commission report has revealed that 27% of all apprentices, and 40% of apprentices aged 16 and 17, are receiving less than the minimum pay rates. The Commission report goes on to say that this is a 'significant increase' in the number of underpaid apprentices compared with the figures in 2011/12. Perhaps somewhat curiously, the Commission recommends that, because of this, there should be a 'freeze in the apprentice rate'. The Commission argues that 'there is no point in raising the legal floor for apprentice pay if it is not, in practice, being

observed'. Instead, the Commission says that the government should 'focus on raising awareness among employers and enforce the existing rate'. Responding to this, BIS Secretary Vince Cable said that the figures were 'worrying' and that 'tough new measures' would be introduced to tackle employers who pay apprentices below the legal minimum'. Last year BIS introduced a policy of 'naming and shaming' employers that underpaid apprentices, however only one employer has thus far been 'named and shamed'.

NAS absorbed by the SFA

The NAS, the organisation that previously had responsibility for the administration and oversight of apprenticeships in England, has now ceased to exist as a separate organisation and has been absorbed into the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). The SFA chief executive has assumed responsibility for the NAS and the former NAS chief executive has taken up a new executive director role within the SFA.

UKCES report on Youth Unemployment

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) has recently released a report comparing the current level of youth unemployment with that in the period immediately preceding the banking collapse of 2008. The report reveals that only 27% of employers had recruited a young person in the 12 month period to the end of 2012, compared with 40% of employers that had recruited a young person in the 12 months to the end of 2007. The report goes on to say that in order to get the employment rate for 16-24 year olds back up to pre 2008 recession levels, 'over 550,000 young people would need to break into the labour market'. UKCES has now called for 'a radical shift in the way in which young people are viewed by employers' and for the creation of 'a culture where the recruitment and development of young people is part of standard business practice in the UK'. Meanwhile, the most recent youth unemployment figures released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), reveals that around 980,000 young people aged 16-24 were out of work in the 3 months from December 2012 to February 2013. This is an increase of around 20,000 on the period from September to November 2012.

Impact of funding changes on provision for unemployed and disadvantaged groups

BIS has recently published a research report on the impact of changes to funding eligibility for courses for unemployed and other disadvantaged groups in the 2011/12 academic year. The report also gives details of how colleges and training providers have responded to these changes. The main findings include the following:

- 'Working with unemployed learners presents particular challenges to all providers, most fundamentally because unemployed learners are a highly diverse group, with very different needs and circumstances'.
- 'Before the policy on Job Outcome Payments was published in April 2012, there was considerable debate and some confusion with providers about how the outcomes would be defined, evidenced and how they could start to prepare for the introduction in 2012/13'.
- 'By the second half of 2011/12, most providers were taking advantage of the funding changes by offering units or full qualifications specifically aimed at helping unemployed people to enter employment and tackle skills related barriers to employment'.
- 'Overall, many providers welcomed the range of Qualifications Credit Framework (QCF) units available for funding and were satisfied that these allowed sufficient flexibility to meet needs of unemployed learners. This increased flexibility has enabled providers to continue to engage with learners they believe would otherwise not have enrolled in learning had they been expected to pay course fees'.
- 'The courses on offer to unemployed learners claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and Employment Support Allowance (ESA) were generally short and ranged in length from around 2 to 8 weeks, and tended to be delivered in classes with small group sizes'.

National Careers Service (NCS) to 'go regional'

The NCS is to launch a range of 'enhanced' services in 12 English regions, and is inviting contractors to tender for contracts to provide these services. Contracts will be awarded to cover the 'maintenance of regional website pages, telephone facilities and community based face-to-face services'. Local contractors will also be expected to 'liaise with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Jobcentre Plus offices, to provide up to date local labour market intelligence and information'. Contractors are able to bid for contracts in more than one of the 12 areas, 'provided they are able to meet the detail and quality of the specification in each area for which they bid'. Organisations submitting successful tenders will be awarded their contracts at the end of October.

Skills Funding Agency (SFA) proposes further cuts to course funding eligibility

The SFA recently released a document entitled 'A New Streamlined Funding System for Adult Skills', which the agency says is part of a 'strategic review of the qualifications offer'. The document contains plans to cease providing funding for around 1,600 qualifications with effect from January 2014. The proposals come in the wake of an earlier announcement by SFA that it would cease the provision of funding for nearly 2,500 qualifications that had 'little or no uptake'. Awarding bodies have claimed that this could affect up to 50,000 students, many of whom will be unemployed and need the qualifications to help them to get a job or to progress to a higher level qualification', adding that the proposed cuts risked 'destabilising the system'. Responding to this, a spokesperson for the SFA said that the aim was to 'ensure that only those qualifications that are demanded by learners and employers and that meet the highest standards are supported by public funds'. A spokesperson for the National Open College Network (NCON), said that the proposed changes would lead to awarding bodies re-writing their qualifications to fit the new SFA criteria, adding that the move could see many awarding bodies 'coming up with new qualifications'. This has prompted a response from Ofqual, with a spokesperson saying 'we are alert to this and will take action to make sure that qualifications are fit for purpose and meet the appropriate standards'.

In light of the concerns expressed, the SFA has now announced that it will delay the implementation of its proposals until it has undertaken a further review. A spokesperson for the SFA said, 'we do understand the value of small award-sized qualifications. However we are concerned about whether they are all of a sufficient size to ensure meaningful learning and achievement, and whether they all support progression and job outcomes'. The spokesperson added that the SFA would 'continue to review the position of small qualifications as part of our broader qualifications review work' and would also 'take into account the outcomes of the Whitehead Review of Adult Vocational Qualifications' (See section below)

The Whitehead Review of Adult Vocational Qualifications

Presumably on the basis that you can never have too many reviews, FE minister, Matthew Hancock, has asked Nigel Whitehead, BAE Systems Group Managing Director, and a UKCES Commissioner (not to be confused with an FE Commissioner, or a commissioner), to review adult vocational qualifications in England. The aim of the review is 'to create a simple, accessible and consistent adult vocational qualifications system that matches and adapts to changing skills needs, and that are used and valued by employers and individuals in England', (which seems to be a bit more like an outcome than an aim). The remit of the review is to ascertain the extent to which current adult vocational qualifications:

- 'Are deliverable in a wide range of contexts'.
- 'Have a recognised identity'.
- 'Provide a passport for learners'.
- 'Are attractive as investments for employers and individuals'.
- 'Are broad in content'.
- 'Are aligned to competency needs'
- 'Safeguard niche sectors whilst allowing unused or under-used qualifications to be removed'.

- 'Are trusted and respected by employers and individuals'.

Independent Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning publishes its report

The Independent Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning has now published its report, which has the snappy title, *'It's about Work ... Excellent Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning'*. The Commission, which consists of representatives drawn from colleges, training providers and industry, makes a number of recommendations, the main one being that a 'National Vocational Education and Training Centre' (NVETC) should be established. The NVETC would 'champion research and development of vocational pedagogy' and would 'develop a regional network of centres to showcase excellent vocational teaching and learning'. The NVETC would also be involved in 'vocational curriculum design, learning technology, and continuing professional development'. The remit and the nature of the work to be carried out by the NVETC will obviously be very different to that of the new FE Guild, and that of the the Institute for Learning (IfL), and that of the soon to be defunct Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), and that of the already defunct Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), Further Education Development Agency (FEDA), Further Education Unit (FEU) and Further Education Staff College (FESC).

The Commission also calls for the sector to promote partnership between employers and vocational training providers. This would be a 'two way street', where employers were 'not just customers of vocational education, but were engaged at every level in the creation and delivery of programmes', adding that 'every curriculum area should have an employer sponsor to ensure industry relevance'. Another key recommendation is the introduction of 'Teach Too'. This is a scheme that would enable industry experts to 'spend time in the classroom passing on their skills', although how this would be reconciled with the push for all FE teachers to have Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) is no doubt yet to be resolved

The Commission has recommended that the set up costs of the NVETC should be met from within 'existing budgets' and, swiftly passing the baton, has proposed that the next step should be for the FE Guild to 'carry out a feasibility study and run a pilot programme to test the report's main recommendations'. The Commission says that several leading organisations 'have already expressed an interest in the plan' and that FE minister, Matthew Hancock is 'particularly excited' about the 'Teach Too' recommendation.

FE Guild developments

BIS has allocated a direct grant of £18.8 million (excluding VAT) to the FE Guild to cover the costs of its operation in its first 2 years. In the third year, Guild operating costs will be met through funds released from a 'top slice' of the overall BIS skills budget. After that, the Guild will be expected to become self-funding. The amount allocated by BIS is around £10 million less than was initially asked for, however the Guild could be given an opportunity of to increase the level of its future funding by taking on extra responsibilities such as organising WorldSkills UK competitions and undertaking the administration of the process for colleges to obtain 'Chartered' status. The Guild will initially employ 32 full time staff and will be physically located in central London. London has been chosen in preference to a less expensive regional location since savings would apparently be minimal 'once additional travel time and other costs have been included'.

David Hughes, independent chair of the FE Guild's steering group, said that 'the sector now had a unique opportunity to shape the organisation which will provide training and set professional standards across the sector', and that the steering group 'would now be able to recruit a chief executive for the Guild before its launch in August'. Martin Doel, chief executive of the AoC (which, along with the AELP, was contracted by BIS to help set up the Guild) said that the new Guild around would 'provide a real one stop focus' for the development of teaching and learning, curriculum design, leadership, management and governance and professional development (although if operating alongside the Institute for Learning and the proposed NVETC, it would perhaps be more a part of a 'three stop focus')

FE Guild board members will be drawn from key stakeholder organisations, including the AoC, the AELP, the Third Sector National Learning Alliance (TSNLA), and the Association of Adult Education and Training Organisations (AAETO). These four organisations apparently now operate under the collective name 'HOLEX'. (For those of you left wondering what on earth this is, HOLEX says that it exists 'to promote the role of our member organisations in extending and widening participation in FE sector'. HOLEX should not be confused with LANDEX, which is an abbreviation of 'Land Based Colleges Aspiring to Excellence', nor with SPANDEX, LATEX, or TIPPEX, obviously).

Controversially, it seems that one key stakeholder group that will be excluded from membership of the FE Guild Board will be students. As might be expected, this is being vigorously opposed by the National Union of Students (NUS), however a spokesperson for the AoC has defended the decision not to have students as board members, saying that although engaging with students remains 'a very firm commitment' of the Guild, it was felt that the students should be 'part of the wider sector engagement processes, rather than being part of the governance arrangements', and that student membership of the Guild Steering Group, rather than the Guild Board, was the best way of achieving this.

First NUS president from the FE sector

Toni Pearce has become the first person to be elected as president of the NUS to have come from an FE background. The position has traditionally been held by people drawn from the HE sector. Ms Pearce is also the first NUS president who does not hold a university degree. She previously served as the NUS vice president for FE for the last two years and prior to that was the students' union president at Cornwall College between 2009 and 2011. In her former role as NUS vice president for FE, Ms Pearce called for the reintroduction of the education maintenance allowance (EMA) for disadvantaged FE students in England and expressed strong opposition to the introduction of FE loans. She is supported by Joe Vinson, who has been elected as the new NUS vice president for FE. Mr Vinson was previously president of Cornwall College student's union, having held this office since 2011. The NUS has also elected an apprentice to its national committee for the first time. This is Jenni-Marie Pittuck, who is president of City College, Norwich, and is also a customer services apprentice at the college.

New AoC President elected

Michelle Sutton, the principal of Bradford College and chair of the Leeds City Regional Skills Network and also the West Yorkshire Colleges Consortium., has been elected as the new president of the AoC for 2013/14. She will take over from Maggie Galliers, who recently retired as principal of Leicester College.

20th Anniversary of FE College Incorporation

1 April 2013 was the 20th anniversary of the day in which FE and Sixth Form colleges became independent of the local education authorities of which they were once a part. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 was introduced by the then Conservative government and the passing of the Act freed colleges from local authority control and turned them into independent corporations with their own separate legal identities. The legislation also meant that colleges were funded directly through a new Further Education Funding Agency established under the same Act, rather than through revenue support grant funding allocated to local authorities by central government. Incorporation was bitterly contested by the FE teaching and support staff unions and by most local authorities. However many colleges frequently found their budgets had been 'top sliced' by local authorities to fund such things as local infrastructure projects, and these colleges suddenly found themselves financially much better off. Twenty years later, colleges are facing the prospect of their budgets being 'top sliced' by the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to fund such things as local infrastructure projects. All of which seems to suggest that what goes around, comes around.

And finally.....

A group of FE students from a college in England were spending a weekend in Edinburgh on a geography field trip. That weekend also happened to an international rugby weekend in Edinburgh. Scotland was playing Wales and the college party had got caught up with the crowds of fans making their way down Princes Street towards the Murrayfield Stadium. Suddenly, a huge Pit Bull terrier, jaws open and teeth bared, lunged out of the crowd towards a little girl. The girl screamed and those nearby gasped in horror, but before the dog could reach the girl, a man in a red tracksuit jumped out of the crowd, got an arm around its throat and applied sufficient pressure to render it unconscious. The crowd clapped and cheered, and a journalist from the Scotsman Newspaper, who had witnessed the heroic deed, rushed up and took photographs of both the man and the comatose Pit Bull. Taking out his notebook, and noticing that the man was wearing red, the journalist said (with a broad Scottish accent, obviously) 'Hoots mon. That was the brawest thing I've iver seen. Get the 'Scotsman' tomorrow because the front page headline will say, *'Welsh Rugby Fan Saves Young Girl from Certain Death'*". The man shook his head and replied, 'No you've got it wrong. I'm not going to the rugby match'. 'Och, dinnae worry about that, said the journalist, 'I can alter the headline to: *'Welsh Hero Saves Wee Girl from Jaws of Pit Bull'*'. 'No, you're wrong again', said the man. I'm not Welsh; I'm a college lecturer from Birmingham here with a party of FE students on a geography field trip. 'Och, that's nae a problem' said the reporter, 'I'll just alter the headline to: *'English B*****d Throttles Family Pet'*."

Meanwhile, the Scottish FA has given the contract for the development of a goal line technology system to a consortium of FE colleges. It is hoped that the new system, which is called 'Hawk Eye the New' will be in use from the start of the new season.

Alan Birks – April 2013

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