

Sector Developments

New 'Tech Levels' to be introduced

Apparently undaunted by the problematical success of earlier attempts to introduce a vocational equivalent to GCE A Levels, the UK government intends to introduce yet another one for schools and colleges in England to grapple with. This new qualification will be known as the 'Tech Level'. Tech Levels will take as long as GCE A Levels to complete. However, in addition to being expected to have the same degree of 'rigour' as GCE A Levels, the new qualification will also focus on practical activities in recognised occupational areas such as engineering, computing, accounting or hospitality. To gain employer 'buy-in', each Tech Level offered will first need to be endorsed by either a professional association or by at least 5 firms registered with Companies House. Local employers will also be asked to support Tech Levels through the provision of work experience and/or by helping providers to design Tech Level courses. The new qualification will be available from September 2014, and if combined by the achievement of both a core mathematics qualification (at a level similar to the soon to be abandoned AS-Level), and the successful completion of an 'extended project', it will count towards a full Technical Baccalaureate ('TechBacc').

Commenting on the new qualification, the minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, Matthew Hancock said that Tech Levels will 'raise the status of vocational education in England' and that they were 'unashamedly aspirational'.

Applied General Qualifications to be introduced

The UK government has also announced the launch of new 'Applied General Qualifications' in England. Unlike Tech Levels, these are vocational qualifications 'that are not directly linked to a specific occupation, but which will offer a broader study of a vocational area'. Applied General Qualifications will take around the same time to complete as the soon to be defunct AS-Level. Instead of the endorsement of 5 firms and/or a recognised professional body required by the new Tech Levels, each new Applied General Qualification introduced will need the backing of at least three universities.

Previous attempts to introduce a vocational qualification equivalent to GCE A levels

To provide a little background to all this, listed below are some of the previous attempts by the UK government to introduce a vocational A Level equivalent in England.

- In 2000, an Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education (AVCE) was launched. A 'Double AVCE' was deemed to be equivalent to 2 GCE A levels, with a 'Single AVCE' regarded as being equivalent to one GCE A level. The AVCE was so popular with students that it was withdrawn in 2004.
- General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ's) were introduced to complement the (then) new National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ's). Whereas NVQ's were expected to be gained through part time study and to focus on the acquisition of competences in the workplace, GNVQ's could be studied full time in a college. However it never entirely worked out this way. For example, full time students on hairdressing and catering courses studied for NVQ's. An 'Advanced GNVQ' covering 12 units (including 3 'core skills') was deemed to be the equivalent of 2 GCE A levels. The GNVQ was withdrawn in 2006.
- Michael (later Sir Michael) Tomlinson chaired a 'Working Group on 14-19 Reform' that recommended that all 14-19 academic and vocational qualifications, including GCE A Levels should be absorbed into a 'new unified qualification framework' which would lead to a Diploma awarded at one of the first 4 National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels. The Working Group also recommended that the design and structure of the Diplomas should be based on a credit system similar to that which had been developed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) for adult qualifications. Diplomas would consist of 'core learning', 'main learning' and an 'extended project'. The Working Group published its recommendations in a report entitled '14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform' and the response of

the government was to promptly reject virtually all of the proposals contained in it. This was largely because, despite concerns about falling standards, the GCE A Level was regarded by most universities and employers as being the 'Gold Standard' therefore not to be messed around with.

- Although the Tomlinson proposals had been rejected, in 2009 the government did decide to introduce its own version of new 'Diplomas' targeted at 14-19 year olds (perhaps as a sort of half-hearted sop to the hard work that the 14-19 Working Group had put in). However it was made absolutely clear that GCE A Levels were to be retained. The makeup of the new Diplomas consisted of:
 - 'Principal learning'. (This did not involve the heads of FE colleges taking courses). Principal learning was sector-related learning that theoretically had been developed by employers and universities, and which made up roughly 50% of content of the Diploma programme.
 - A project
 - Functional Skills (not to be confused with basic skills, key skills, core skills or essential skills) in English, mathematics and ICT.
 - A minimum of 10 day's work experience.
 - Personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS), such as 'team work' and 'creative thinking'.
 - 'Additional/specialist learning'

Diplomas could be awarded at different levels, again reflecting the NQF. With reference to GCE A Level equivalence, it was possible for a student to study for either a level 3 'Progression Diploma' that was deemed to be equivalent to 2.5 GCE A Levels, or a level 3 'Advanced Diploma' that deemed to be the equivalent of 3.5 GCE A levels. After enormous expenditure both in time and money, the new Diplomas proved both to be unpopular with just about everybody and by 2011 the new Diplomas had all but fizzled out.

All of these new initiatives and qualifications failed to gain a sufficient level of credibility to attract enough takers to make them sustainable in the accreditation market. Unfortunately for them, tens of thousands of young people in England were persuaded to study for these qualifications, only to discover that within a very short time, very few employers could remember what they were, and most had never heard of them.

Meanwhile, despite attempts to kill them off (for example, by threatening to withdraw eligibility for funding) the old tried and tested BTEC awards just carried on. In one guise or another, they have now been in existence for over 30 years. This is partly because they have continued to be a popular option with students and partly because they seem to be generally recognised and understood, both by employers and by university admissions officers.

Impact of the new Tech Levels and Applied General Qualifications on performance league tables

Returning to the present, the launch of Tech Levels and Applied General Qualifications in England is a part of the government's response to the Wolf report, which concluded that existing vocational programmes 'fail to promote progression into either stable, paid employment or higher level education and training in a consistent or an effective way'. However, the introduction of Tech Level and the Applied General Qualification also impact on which vocational qualifications will continue to be included in the 16-19 school and college league tables in England. For courses commencing in September 2014, only those vocational qualifications that have the support of business and/or universities will be included in the 2016 league tables. This will exclude at least 80% of the 5,000 or so existing vocational qualifications that are currently included in the league tables. A spokesperson for City and Guilds has argued that the changes infer that 'many other vocational qualifications are worthless', which he said 'was clearly not the case'.

Employers want more control over public funding for training and vocational qualifications design

A survey of 294 firms recently commissioned by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) reveals that:

- 39% are currently struggling to recruit workers with the advanced scientific, technical, engineering and maths skills they needed.
- 41% expected difficulties recruiting appropriately qualified staff over the next 3 years.
- 45% feel that many applicants for jobs did not have 'the right attitude for work'.
- 39% said that job applicants often lacked any general work experience.
- 62% think that their existing workforce has poor computing skills.
- 55% think that their existing workforce has poor literacy skills.
- 51% think that their existing workforce has poor numeracy skills.
- 34% think school leavers lacked the necessary basic literacy and numeracy skills.
- 33% think that school leavers lacked the necessary technical skills.

The findings of the survey could, of course, be turned on their head. For example, in the case of the last 2 bullet points, it could be argued that the survey infers that 66% of employers think that school leavers have at least adequate numeracy and literacy skills and that 67% of employers think that school leavers have at least adequate technical skills.

However, when it comes to training their existing workforce:

- 93% of firms said that they knew best what employee skills they needed.
- 80% of firms said that there was a need for better designed qualifications that were more focused on employers' needs and industry standards, and that public money should be focused where training is most needed.

Commenting on the survey findings, a spokesperson for the CBI said that 'public resources committed to training and development have often been poorly targeted' and that it was essential to ensure that public funding 'flows to the parts of skills provision most helpful to employers'. The CBI has long argued that skills shortages in key areas is hampering economic recovery and is now arguing that these skills shortages would be better addressed if employers directly controlled the public funding made available for training.

The Richards Review reflects the CBI's opinion on this and also claims that 'too many training schemes have become government-led initiatives, shaped by training professionals rather than employers'. Recommendations made in the review call for 'new qualifications to be redefined by employers', and 'for funding for training to go directly to businesses'. As might be expected, the CBI wants the government to implement the Richard Review recommendations in full and to take action to 'route funding for training directly to firms' so that the public resources available will not be 'badly targeted or sucked up by bureaucracy'.

In response, skills minister Matthew Hancock said that the CBI review 'highlights a serious problem'. He went on to say that 'for far too long our education and skills systems have been distant from the needs of employers' and added that recent government initiated reforms would 'make the whole system more responsive to employers' needs'. He also made reference to the £250 million Employer Ownership of Skills pilot that allows employers to design their own training programmes (now increased by a further £100 million as a result of the recent Spending Review) and went on to say that 'later this year we will put in place reforms so employers can design their own apprenticeships'.

Education Funding Agency (EFA) overpays private trainers by £20 million

In 2011/12 the EFA overpaid private training organisations by around £20 million. In that year, there was an under achievement of around 25% in the volume of 16-18 provision that the EFA had contracted and funded private sector trainers to deliver. 15% of the funding associated with this under achievement (with a contract value of around £30 million) was recovered by the EFA however the remaining 10% (with a contract value of around £20 million) was not.

A spokesperson for the EFA admitted that the agency had allowed some independent training providers 'to keep a certain amount of funding for which no provision had been delivered' but denied that it had 'paid £20 million for nothing'. The EFA spokesperson went on to say that in 2010/11 and 2011/12 the agency had 'applied a 10% margin for some independent providers where they under-delivered to reflect changes to the funding system in those years', adding that 'this has been reduced to 5% in 2012/13'. In support of the EFA, a spokesperson for the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) said, 'the period in question relates to a time when the Department for Education (DfE) was making changes to Foundation Learning' and that some private trainers had been given transition funding support in order 'to protect the provider infrastructure from a serious shock which might have left provision short for young people in some geographical areas'.

Tristram Hunt, the shadow junior Minister for Education, has now called on Michael Gove, to account for the £20 million overpayment, arguing that 'every wasted pound is a pound that could have been spent on improving educational attainment for our young people' and going on to say that 'instead, we have £20 million that appears to be sitting in the bank accounts of private providers'.

UK government spends £60 million on Free School set-up costs

After a ruling by the Information Commissioner, the government has been prevented from withholding information on expenditure on Free Schools in England. (Free Schools are state-funded but independently run). The DfE had previously rejected numerous Freedom of Information requests for details of expenditure on Free Schools and on the various groups applying to set them up. In a letter to the Information Commissioner, Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, said he had 'resisted publishing the information because he wanted to protect applicants from intimidation'.

Information released by the DfE shows that, in addition to the capital funding needed for buying a site or refurbishing buildings, the DfE gave in excess of £20 million in revenue funding to 72 free schools in England before they had actually opened, plus another £40 million in their first year of operation. This revenue funding was in addition to the recurrent financial allocations that the Free Schools receive to teach their pupils. The information released also shows that some £441,000 was spent on 8 Free School projects which were withdrawn before they opened. Details of applications (both successful and unsuccessful) to open mainstream Free Schools and specialist Free Schools, such as University Technical Colleges (UTC's) or Studio Schools were also released.

The first 24 Free Schools opened in September 2011, with another 55 in September 2012. Another 200 Free Schools are due to open from September 2013 and, as part of the recent Spending Review, George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, has announced funding for a further 180 new free schools, 20 new Studio Schools and 20 new UTC's. Meanwhile, there are rumours that the government may be considering changing the legal framework for Academies, Free Schools, UTC's and Studio Schools so that they technically become private sector institutions. This would involve the becoming 'Corporations' with a separate legal entity similar to that of FE and Sixth Form Colleges.

BIS launches a new initiative to foster FE College/Local Enterprise Partnership relationships

A report produced by the Association of Colleges (AoC) last September claimed that relationships between Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and colleges were 'underdeveloped and patchy'. The report went on to say that while some LEPs understood the role of colleges in developing skills, 'disappointingly, the majority still have work to do to tap into this fantastic resource'. As a result, Vince Cable, the minister for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has launched an initiative aimed at providing 'clear incentives for skills providers and LEPs to forge active partnerships, so that people acquire the skills required to get local jobs'. Mr Cable went on to say that he intended to ask the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) 'to put in place powerful incentives to encourage LEPs to work with FE colleges to deliver the courses that the local labour market demands' (which presumably means additional funding). The 3 LEPs that have been chosen to pilot the scheme are the North East LEP, Stoke and Staffordshire LEP, and the West of England LEP.

New 'Single Local Growth Fund' announced

The BIS initiative above is in partial response to Lord Heseltine's review 'No Stone Unturned', which argued that investment and economic growth would be better stimulated if funds controlled by central government departments in Whitehall (including the Adult Skills budget controlled by BIS through the SFA) were to be devolved to the LEPs. Lord Heseltine argued that such devolution would place around £70 billion per year at the disposal of the LEPs, and that because the LEPs understood local investment needs better than remote central government departments, the funding would be used more effectively to raise levels of employment and economic growth. The LEPs would also be able to secure greater levels of leverage of private sector investment. However, in the recent Spending Review, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne announced that only £2 billion per year would be allocated to be shared between the current 39 LEPs for a 5 year period commencing in 2015/16 through a new Single Local Growth Fund.

Half of the £2 billion a year pot is already allocated, including £400 million from the 'New Homes Bonus' and £300m of already allocated transport spending. Alongside this, there is a further ring-fenced £500 million for transport, and £330m for further education capital spending. This has resulted in widespread disappointment, particularly amongst hard pressed local council leaders and chief executives who had been salivating at the prospect of controlling the significant levels of additional funding that would have been placed at their disposal. Exact details of how the Single Growth Fund will work to be finalised, but it seems that in future years at least a proportion of the annual £2 billion of funding allocated to the LEPs will come from the adult skills budget. Colleges will therefore have to fight to get these funds returned to them. On the other hand, there will be a general election in 2015, so it remains uncertain as to how swiftly (if at all) any of the proposed changes will be implemented.

More on the Spending Review

The recent spending review covers only a single year, 2015/16. BIS Minister Vince Cable was reportedly the last Cabinet minister to settle with the Treasury, and his procrastination seems to have paid off. In the period prior to the Spending Review statement, BIS was expecting a cut of between 8% and 10%, representing a reduction in the BIS budget of at least £1 billion. In the end, the cut was 4.4% in cash terms. However, after the general election there will be another review and it is likely that there will more cuts to come. The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) has calculated that BIS is likely to still need to find an additional £1.7 billion in savings over the period 2016/18. This year (2012/13), the BIS budget is more than £14.5 billion. Next year (2014/15) it will be £13.6 billion and we now know it will be £13 billion in 2015/16. This is £1.5 billion less than this year. If the IPPR is right in its predictions, by 2017/18 there will be a cut of £3.2 billion compared with this year.

Immediately after the Spending Review statement, Matthew Hancock, the Minister for FE and Skills circulated a letter to principals and corporation chairs. The main content of the letter was as follows:

- There will be increase in apprenticeship funding
- Eligibility to participate in traineeships is extended to age 24
- A further £100 million will be made available for the Employer Ownership of Skills project
- Funding for Adult and Community Learning and for the National Careers Service is protected
- £330 million has been earmarked for further education capital spending

Against this Mr Hancock said there will be a cut of £360 million in 2015/16 adult skills budget. This is expected to be ameliorated through:

- £100 million savings gained as a result of 24+ Advanced Learning Loans replacing grant funding for level 3 courses taken by those over the age of 24
- £260 million savings gained from 're-prioritising' existing under-utilised funding and the withdrawal of grant funding for courses leading to low value qualifications

Increasing concern at the collapse in part time and mature HE student numbers

As mentioned in a previous **Click** newsletter, in the wake of higher tuition fees charged, the number of students attending part time HE courses in English universities has contracted by 40% since 2010. As a result, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), has now added its voice to the growing level of concern expressed at the continuing sharp fall in part time and mature student numbers. A spokesperson for OFFA said that the contraction was 'particularly worrying as those studying in this way tended to be from less advantaged backgrounds' and that 'universities should do more to reach out to older learners'. In response to this, BIS and Universities UK (a universities 'umbrella group') will conduct a joint review of part-time and mature student participation in higher education, with a report expected to be published in October.

A BIS spokesperson said that the department was 'determined to support all part-time students at university' and went on to explain that, 'from 2012 the department has made none means-tested tuition fee loans available to new part-time students', adding that this 'significantly increases the number of students, including mature students, who can receive government support'. Appearing to support the BIS optimism, the OFFA spokesperson suggested that 'one possible reason contributing to the decline could be that the new student finance system has not been communicated clearly enough to prospective part-time and mature students', and went on to say that 'data showing further contraction in the 2012/13 academic year, and for the 2013/14 application cycle, which is still under way, may not prove to be indicative of longer term trends'.

It will be interesting to see what impact the new '24+ Advanced Learning Loans' will have on the level of mature student participation in further education in England, when they are implemented for the first time at the start of the 2013/14 academic year. So far, there have been 8,679 applications for the loans (which are aimed at learners aged 24 and over studying on courses at level 3 or 4). However, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has warned that this represents only around 2% of the total number of people of this age who were studying on courses at these levels in 2010/11. In addition, there have been no loan applications at all from those aged 24+ wanting to take higher level or advanced apprenticeships

Help for disadvantaged students go to university

Tower Hamlets Borough Council, which is based in one of the poorest areas of London, is offering grants of £1,500 to help up to 400 young people from less well-off backgrounds go to university. Grants will be paid in two instalments over the first two years of a student's course and will help pay for living costs, the cost of text books and travel. The £1.26 million needed to fund the grant payments is supported by the Mayor's Fund, but the budget for the grant will only be available for the next two years. Southwark, another London Borough Council in a deprived area has also created a fund whereby the council pays all of a student's tuition fees for their time at university. However, the numbers that can be supported by the fund are very limited and in 2012/13 only 8 people could be helped with the cost of their university tuition fees.

Meanwhile, the UK government continues to argue that no one in England should be put off going to university because of the cost. The government says that this is because students are eligible for state loans of up to £9,000 a year to cover tuition fees and because graduates only have to pay back their loans once they earn more than £21,000 a year. In fact the government appears to be so confident that students from less well-off backgrounds will not be prevented from going to university that the recent Spending Review for 2015/16 included a £100 million cut in the National Scholarship Programme, which provides financial support for poorer students.

'Poorly performing governors in England's schools should be removed from office'

The House of Commons Education Select Committee has recently published a report on the quality of governance in schools in England. The report says that 'governing bodies perform a critical role in school leadership. However the report goes on to say that the 'quality of governing bodies, manned by volunteers, was inadequate in many schools, particularly primaries'. (*Without wishing to be politically correct, since*

many school governors are women, the word, 'manned' should really be replaced by the word 'staffed', if only to avoid gender bias. You would have thought that Select Committee members would have known this). The report goes on to say that, 'poorly performing governors in England's schools should be removed from office' and that there should be 'better measures for intervention when governing bodies were poor or failing'.

The report also says that:

- Governors can be hard to recruit and said that vacancies were a significant issue for some schools and that around 10% of all governing body places are currently vacant in England. However, the Select Committee did not see the answer to lie in offering unpaid volunteers a wage (but accepted that there could be some circumstances in which payment might be appropriate, such as when skilled governors helped other schools improve their governance).
- .Governing bodies needed to be better at identifying the mix of skills and representation they needed on the Board in order to be effective.
- Too many governors have not received suitable training and recommended that the government required all schools to offer training to all new governors.

Commenting on the Select Committee report, Education Secretary Michael Gove said that he wants 'to speed up reforms to school governance', but has managed to offend many volunteer governors by saying that 'they were often local worthies who viewed their post as a badge of status and not of work'. In response to Mr Gove's comments, Emma Knights, chief executive of the National Governors' Association suggested that Mr Gove should not confuse the term *volunteer* with *amateur*.

(Although the content of this section clearly relates to the schools sector, it is included in the newsletter because that it may only be a matter of time before similar sanctions are proposed for use against governors of English FE colleges).

Education and Training Foundation Board Members appointed

The Education and Training Foundation (formerly known as the FE Guild) has appointed its first board members. Nominations for board membership were submitted by the foundation member organisations comprised of the AoC, the AELP, the Third Sector National Learning Alliance, and the Association of Adult Education and Training Organisations, collectively known as 'HOLEX' (not to be confused with Horlicks).

The new board members are:

- Don Hayes MBE, chief executive of 'Enable' (a voluntary sector consortium)
- Lynsi Hayward-Smith, head of Adult Learning and Skills at Cambridge County Council
- John Hyde, co-founder and executive chairman of HIT (the Hospitality Industry Training).
- Chris Jeffrey, strategy and policy adviser for General Physics (UK) Ltd Skills Training Academy
- Asha Khemka OBE, principal of Vision West Nottinghamshire College
- Peter McCann, principal of Kirklees College
- Mark White, vice-chair of governors at Stockton Riverside College.

The board will appoint an independent chair and up to five more specialist board members. (Discussions around student representation on the board are still on-going). The Board is expected to meet four times per year and, other than for expenses, board members will not be paid for their services. Board members will serve for a fixed term and after the first two years a number of board members will stand down to allow for 'rotation' in the membership of the board.

The priorities for the Foundation were outlined in a letter from Matthew Hancock. These priorities require the Foundation to provide support to the FE sector to help achieve:

- More rigorous and challenging apprenticeship programmes, particularly at level 3 and above.
- Improved responsiveness to employer, community and learner needs.
- The delivery of high quality traineeships.
- Strong governance with 'a relentless focus on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment'.
- More effective and innovative teaching in priority areas including English and mathematics.
- Measurable progress in implementing the key recommendations from the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL), including 'Teach Too'.
- More teachers and assessors with higher levels of current occupational and subject knowledge.
- Better focussed research, which has a greater impact on improving teaching, learning and assessment.
- Increased employer engagement and active involvement of employers in all stages of the learning process, from design to delivery.
- Easily accessible, high quality learning materials and resources in key areas, sourced through an effective on-line knowledge system, and widely adopted by practitioners to enhance learning.
- Skills competitions that have greater impact in improving overall standards of vocational learning.
- Effective partnerships with employers, government agencies and other key stakeholder groups.

And finally.....

Once upon a time, in further education college in the Midlands, there worked a brilliant science lecturer. All of her students loved her and she inspired them so much that they asked her to put on extra classes for them, which she did. She worked selflessly night and day in her students' interests and did all she could possibly do, not only to help them pass their examinations, but also to help them achieve their true potential in life. But sadly, they demanded so much of her time that there simply weren't enough hours in the day to do all that needed to be done. Therefore, because she was also an outstanding bio-chemist and geneticist, as well as being a dedicated teacher, she decided to create a clone of herself in order that she could get twice as much work done and could provide twice as much help for her students.

The clone helped her immensely, but sadly, it also had a genetic defect that resulted in it constantly swearing at the students, and making rude and offensive remarks to them. The college principal (who was otherwise delighted to have two lecturers for the salary of one) became very concerned at the high number of complaints she was receiving from parents. She was also worried about the impact this might have on the outcome of the Ofsted inspection that was expected to be imminent. So the principal summoned the lecturer to her office and told her that she had to get rid of the clone. At first, the lecturer didn't know what to do, but then thought of a solution. She lured the clone to the roof of the college building (which was seven storeys high) and then, having checked that there were no passers-by below, pushed it off the edge. And that was the end of the clone, but sadly it was not the end of the story. Someone saw her do the deed and notified the police, and shortly after this, the lecturer was arrested and charged with making an obscene clone fall.

*There will be no newsletter for the rest of July, or for August, because I shall hopefully be on a beach somewhere sipping Pina Coladas. However, normal service will be resumed in September (whether you like it or not). In the meantime, from all at **Click**, we hope that you have a pleasant and refreshing summer break.*

Alan Birks – July 2013

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