

Sector Developments

BIS bureaucrats proposed ‘killing off’ FE colleges

At a fringe meeting held at the recent Liberal Democrats’ conference in Glasgow, Vince Cable, the minister for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) told delegates that in 2010, senior civil servants in his department suggested that money could be saved by ‘killing off’ FE colleges. The civil servants explained to Dr Cable that this ‘would not be a problem since nobody will really notice’. They went on to suggest that funds diverted from FE could be used to help him meet his party’s pledge to abolish HE student tuition fees. Dr Cable said that he agreed that ‘it would have been easy to have taken all the money out of the FE sector’, however, to his credit, he told delegates that he had rejected the proposal because he believed that it was ‘absolutely critical for the future skills base of the country that we have strong post-school training and education’. The suggested proposal to ‘kill off’ FE was confirmed by David Hughes, who at the time was a senior manager at the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and dealt directly with Dr Cable on funding and provider services issues. Mr Hughes, who is now the chief executive of the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) said ‘It was an unprecedented time for government spending cuts and people were thinking the unthinkable’. He also confirmed that Dr Cable ‘was not misleading people with his comments’ and that he and the then Minister for FE and Skills, John Hayes had ‘both fought the corner for adult skills and community learning’.

Since 2010, the schools sector has seen its revenue funding protected and has benefited from many billions of pounds of publicly funded capital expenditure on the building of new schools. The HE sector, whilst ostensibly having faced an initial 40% cut in funding, has more than had this made up through the tripling of student tuition fees. BIS, through the Student Loans Company (SLC), pays these fees on up front to the universities in the hope that the cash can eventually be recovered from the students. Universities are poised to receive even more funding in the future as a result of the elimination of the ‘cap’ on the level of HE student recruitment. Meanwhile, as most of you working in FE and sixth form colleges will be only too painfully aware, by the end of this parliament next May, colleges will have been required to cope with a cut of around 35% in the adult skills budget and a cut of 17.5% in funding for 18 year olds on full time college courses. Alongside this, the government has encouraged more private providers to enter the FE market and will, in the near future, be transferring large amounts of FE funding from colleges directly to employers. And just for good measure, colleges are now required to provide extra mathematics and English tuition for those 16 and 17 year-old students and to help them achieve at least a GCSE grade C in these subjects (for less than £500 per subject), even though their previous schools have proved to be not up to the task after six years.

More than any other sector of education, it is clearly FE that has borne the brunt of government cuts in education spending, and now it has emerged that senior bureaucrats in BIS proposed that FE colleges should be ‘killed off’ entirely. If the main purpose of those associations and groups (largely funded by subscriptions paid from hard-pressed college budgets) is to protect and defend the interests of FE colleges, you might be forgiven for thinking that they haven’t been making a very good job of it so far.

Skills minister warns of more cuts to college budgets

FE and sixth form colleges may have survived at least for the moment, but Nick Boles, the new Minister for Skills and Equalities for England, has warned that whoever wins the next election, the next cuts round ‘will be tough for colleges’. Mr Boles said ‘I can’t guarantee that I’ll be Skills Minister next May, let alone what deal I’ll negotiate on behalf of colleges’. He went on to say ‘Of course I will fight for them, but I will only fight for them to do things that are worthwhile’. Mr Boles gave assurances that ‘FE was valued by the Prime Minister’ and that Mr. Cameron ‘would not have put the expansion of apprenticeships at the heart of his last party conference speech before the general election if he didn’t passionately believe in the importance of technical skills to young people, so they can get jobs’, and added ‘If I were running a college right now, I would be trying to think about the absolute maximum that I could expand my apprenticeships activity. The more colleges gear up to be able to do that, the more likely it is they will find they can secure a relatively consistent source of revenue’.

New Vocational Education Research Centre to be established

Although, FE colleges in England are clearly struggling to cope with massive front line budgets, and look likely to face even more cuts in the future, BIS has nevertheless decided to take another £3 million from the

FE budget to fund a new 'Vocational Education Research Centre'. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly under the circumstances, the Association of Colleges (AoC) and other sector representative groups said that they 'warmly welcomed' the announcement. BIS says that role of the new centre will be to:

- Provide 'world-class research into technical skills'
- Help assess 'the impact of vocational skills on economic growth'
- Evaluate 'the role of training in helping unemployed people back to work'
- Analyse 'how employers approach vocational education and the use of innovation'
- Provide 'independent expertise and policy advice for the vocational sector'.

The governing body of the new centre will be comprised of:

- Professor Alison Wolf (author of the Wolf Report on 14-19 vocational education and recently elevated to the peerage by the Conservatives), who will chair the board.
- Frank McLoughlin, Principal of City and Islington College, who chaired the recent Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL).
- Henry Overmann, Director of 'Spatial Economics Research' at the London School of Economics.
- Josh Hillman, Education Director of the Nuffield Foundation.

The board's first task will be to assess the bids received from organisations interested in taking on the running of the centre. In carrying out these assessments, the board will be joined by Frank Bowley, the Deputy Director for Skills Policy Analysis at BIS, along with representatives of the Economics and Social Research Council and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

The new centre will receive £1 million of funding for 3 years with a 'possible extension to 5 years'. Since presumably no one would wish to see any unnecessary duplication of effort, the new centre will no doubt be mindful of the 'independent expertise and policy advice for the vocational sector' and 'research into technical skills' already being provided by other organisations, such as the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), the 157 Group, the Skills Commission, the UK Skills Taskforce, and the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL), to name but a few.

New 'Behavioural Insights Research Centre for Mathematics and English' to be established

BIS has also decided that £2.9 million should be taken from the FE budget to provide a 'start-up grant' for the establishment of a 'Behavioural Insights Research Centre for Mathematics and English'. The new centre will operate in partnership with the existing 'Behavioural Insights Team', which apparently is also referred to as the 'Nudge Unit'. (This has nothing to do with fruit machines, in case you were wondering). The centre will 'conduct comprehensive research, trials and analysis into adult literacy and numeracy', with the aim of 'looking at the best ways to motivate people to improve their English and mathematics and how to develop flexible ways of learning that fit in with people's lives and meet the needs of employers'. BIS says that the centre will be a 'world leading research facility', and is a key element of the government's strategy to address the problem of growing numbers of young adults who lack a minimum GCSE grade C (or equivalent) in these subjects. The centre will no doubt wish to liaise closely with NIACE, which is already involved in a similar range of activities.

New National College for High Speed Rail

The new National College for High Speed Rail will be located in Doncaster and Birmingham, with its headquarters at the Birmingham site. A spokesperson for BIS said that the sites were selected 'following a consultation process that attracted a number of very strong proposals from across the country'. The spokesperson went on to say that 'all bids were assessed against a range of criteria including the size and availability of a suitable site, location, accessibility, and the potential to develop strong links with employers and providers already operating in the sector'. The college will provide specialist vocational training at level 4 and above for engineers working on the High Speed 2 (HS2) line that will link Birmingham and London by 2026. Terry Morgan, who is also the chair of CrossRail, will be the chair of the governing body of the new college and other board members will include representatives of HS2 Ltd, rail industry employers and representatives from key stakeholders in the Birmingham and Doncaster areas. It appears that BIS did not think that existing FE colleges had the capacity, or were capable of developing the capacity, to deliver the required level of training for the HS2 project.

The overall cost of the HS2 project is estimated to be around £50 billion (although some have said the cost will be closer to £80 billion), and on its completion business people will be able to get from Birmingham to

London in around an hour, compared to the current 1 hour 20 minutes. This will undoubtedly be a considerable source of comfort to all of those people who currently have to stand up on commuter lines (assuming they have access to one) because of a lack of carriages, or whose journeys are subject to endless delays because the line, engines and rolling stock being used is so much in need of repair. Cynics might perhaps also be wondering why business people couldn't just start their meetings 20 minutes later.

Nevertheless, BIS says that as many as 2,000 apprenticeship opportunities are expected to be created by HS2, along with around 25,000 people being employed in its construction. Commenting on the launch, BIS Secretary Vince Cable said 'The opening of the HS2 College demonstrates that the UK is advancing as a global leader in rail manufacturing'. Prime Minister David Cameron went on to add that 'The opening of this National College will ensure that we have a pool of locally-trained workers with the right skills to draw upon for future projects'. Notwithstanding this, because of the legal requirement to invite tenders from firms across the European Union, HS2 may actually become a source of lucrative contracts for firms based elsewhere in Europe and the employment opportunities created through the project may go to workers from outside the UK (as has been the case with many other large scale government capital projects in the past). Meanwhile, BIS is also developing plans for the establishment of another new college, this time for training workers in the UK nuclear power industry. Much of the energy industry in the UK is already foreign owned, and much more is likely to become foreign owned in the wake French and Chinese investment plans.

Empty speeches, oaths and consultants

Nicky Morgan made her first speech as Education Secretary for England to delegates at the recent Conservative Party Conference. It was widely expected that her speech would include a policy announcements on the future of careers provision, but instead, she said that 'for too long careers had been overlooked in schools' and that businesses 'should work more closely with schools on improving careers advice'. She went on to say that work experience should be 'something of value, something that opens people's eyes to the possibilities of the world of work' and that 'the government needed to show all providers, regardless of type, that they were equally valued'. She also made references to what she considered to be the successes of Conservative education policy, including the expansion of Free Schools and University Technical Colleges and the introduction of 'tougher' GCSEs and Technical Baccalaureates.

In his speech to delegates at the recent Labour Party Conference, the party leader Ed Miliband said that improving apprenticeships was part of his '10-year plan to transform the UK', and that a future Labour government would introduce measures that, by 2025, would ensure that 'the number of school-leavers becoming apprentices would match the number going to university'. Part of the way through his speech he produced an apprentice electrician called Elizabeth and said 'She is one of the lucky few. Elizabeth's school helped her to get an apprenticeship but so many other schools don't do that'. He went on to say that 'a lot of the apprentices' he had met had told him 'my school said apprenticeships are rubbish and they wouldn't help me, but now I'm doing it and it's really great for me'.

Meanwhile, Tristram Hunt, the Shadow Education Secretary for England, has called for teachers to be required to 'swear an oath committing themselves to the values of their profession'. Mr Hunt said that this would be a 'symbolic gesture that would help to elevate the status of the profession' and would emphasize the 'moral calling and the noble profession of teaching'. He apparently got the idea during a recent fact finding visit to Singapore, where it seems he was looking for more new initiatives to impose on schools and colleges. Mr Hunt was clearly inspired by what he saw during his visit and insisted that it was a 'stereotype' to suggest that all Asian school systems were just 'exams sweatshops'.

Changing tack, Mr Hunt said that a future Labour government would not seek to restore 'an old-fashioned, one-size-fits-all style of school, with less choice for parents'. (Nor, sadly, does it appear that a future Labour government would seek to restore any of the massive cuts to FE funding made by the present government). A future Labour government, he said, would want to see 'a multiplicity of provision, including academy chains, single academies and community schools', but warned that it 'would stop the opening of more new Free Schools and bring existing schools into the academy system'. He went on to say that Labour was relaxed about more 'parent-led' academies (leading some observers to speculate that perhaps he may not have read the Clarke and Kershaw reports on the 'Trojan horse' affair all that closely).

As an aside to this, Mr Hunt has announced that he has appointed a researcher on a seven-month contract worth £74,000. The researcher will apparently advise him on policy. To thwart any suggestion of financial profligacy, Mr Hunt was quick to explain that the accountancy firm, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC) is covering the cost of the researcher. PWC recently launched a policy initiative entitled 'Re-thinking

government', which argues that 'new approaches are needed to public service delivery. These new approaches include proposals for opening public services to a wider range of providers from the private, not-for-profit and social enterprise sectors' such as PWC.

New shadow minister for FE and Skills

Ed Miliband has appointed Yvonne Fovargue as the new shadow minister for FE and Skills for England. She replaces Rushanara Ali, who resigned at the end of last month after refusing to support her party's stance on military action in Iraq. Ms Forvague has been an MP since 2010. Over this period she has held the posts of shadow Transport Minister (for England), Labour Whip and shadow Defence Secretary.

New Skills Funding Agency (SFA) Chief Executive is appointed

Peter Lauener has been appointed chief executive of the SFA replacing the interim chief executive Keith Smith, who has been performing the role since September. However, Mr Lauener will be retaining his current job as the chief executive of the Education Funding Agency (EFA), a post he has held since it was formed in April 2012, having previously been the chief executive of the former Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA). Mr Lauener will have separate accountability for each agency's budget and it has been stressed that there are no plans to merge the EFA and SFA.

No further reduction in the funding rate for 18 year olds next year, says Nicky Morgan.

The Education Secretary for England, Nicky Morgan has told MPs that the government has 'no plans to reduce the funding rate for 18 year olds in the 2015/16 academic year'. However, she would not confirm that funding rates for 16 and 17 year olds in England would remain unchanged saying, 'We can't confirm the base rate of funding until we know how many places we're going to fund and we won't know that until January'. This position reiterates the comments made in a recent letter to colleges from the EFA Director for Young People, Peter Mucklow. In the letter, Mr Mucklow says 'We plan to confirm the national funding rate in January 2015, informed by final data on student numbers in 2013/14 and early data on 2014/15 academic year student numbers'.

New report says FE has been subject to excessive change and instability

A report commissioned by City and Guilds entitled 'Sense and Instability' has called for 'less frequent disruptive policy changes', and argues that government skills and employment policies need to be 'more carefully designed, thoroughly tested and slowly embedded'. The report points out that since the mid-1980s, responsibility for FE and Skills has been 'flipped between departments or has been shared with multiple departments 10 times', has been the subject of 13 major acts of Parliament, and has had a total of 61 Secretaries of State with responsibility for the area. The report says that 'Changes in government have also meant rapid changes in policy, with each minister wanting to leave his or her mark', and goes on to say 'While these initiatives can have positive effects, sometimes it feels like a case of change for change's sake'. The report recommends that there should be 'greater scrutiny of changes to skills policy' to ensure 'better value for money', and that the government should consider setting up an organisation for FE and skills similar to the Office for Budgetary Responsibility, 'in order to achieve coherence through independent oversight'.

Ofqual to change accreditation regulation system

Glenys Stacey, the Ofqual chief executive, has informed the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) that from next month (November), and with the exception of GCSEs and GCE A Levels, there will no longer be any requirement for qualifications to be accredited by Ofqual before they are regulated. For those of you, who like me, haven't a clue as to what this means, it seems that awarding organisations will be allowed to put qualifications straight onto the Ofqual register and, instead of having to meet a list of specifications to gain accreditation in a 'one-off exercise', qualifications will come under scrutiny at various stages to make sure they maintain their quality. Ms Stacey said that Ofqual was 'removing barriers that distract from validity'. She went on to say that it was 'easy to assume that an accreditation process provides a vital seal of approval for a qualification, but it does not', and added 'we have found that a check at the start of the qualification is not an effective way of securing a valid qualification as it runs'. She went on to warn that, 'The changes we are making do not provide awarding bodies with a license to put poor qualifications into the system' and added that 'awarding bodies can expect to have their qualifications checked at any time'.

Increase in challenges to GCSE and GCE A Level grades.

Figures released by Ofqual for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, show a large increase in the numbers of GCSE and GCE A Level subject grades that have been challenged. Numbers increased by 56% in 2013/14 (to around 444,000) compared with 2012/13. This means that, on average, around one in every 33 scripts marked in 2013/14 year resulted in an inquiry about marking or the grades awarded. This has led to claims by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) that there is now a 'lack of confidence in the exam system which has been exacerbated by frequent and ad hoc changes to qualifications'.

League table reforms result in lower pass rates

Data recently published by the DfE shows that in 2012/13, 59.2% of 16 year olds in England achieved at least five good GCSEs at Grade A*-C, including English and mathematics. However, in the following year (2013/14), the government decreed that large numbers of vocational qualifications would be removed from school performance measures. The government also decreed that only a pupil's first attempt at a GCSE would count in the league tables. One of the consequences of these changes was that the number of pupils in England achieving the government's benchmark five GCSEs Grade A*- C including English and mathematics in 2013/14 fell to 52.6%. Commenting on this fall in performance, DfE officials said that the reforms had 'made it hard to compare results year on year'.

Warning of Sixth Form College redundancies

The Sixth Form Colleges' Association (SFCA) says that staff redundancies in the wake of Ofqual's proposed reforms to GCSEs and GCE A Levels starting in September 2015 is 'inevitable'. Although final decisions have apparently not yet been made, around 24 subjects are likely to be discontinued, including Environmental Studies, Human Biology and Film Studies. Ofqual says that some subjects are being discontinued because there was 'too much overlap with other qualifications, while others might disappear because exam boards were not prepared to invest to make sure they met the tough new requirements'.

The SFCA says that this will lead to sixth form colleges having to make 'difficult staffing decisions' and that as a result of this some teachers' jobs would 'inevitably be placed in jeopardy'. Meanwhile, student numbers in some A Level subjects have already fallen because the increased emphasis now placed on the Russell Group's list of facilitating subjects, which encourages students to take more 'traditional' subjects.

Reprise for Functional Skills

In what seems to be a policy U-turn, the government now appears to be prepared to continue to accept Functional Skills as an alternative to GCSEs for 16-18 year-olds. This represents a change in the government's previous stance whereby GCSEs in mathematics and English were on the verge of being deemed to be the only acceptable form of accreditation. The policy change was outlined in a recent letter from Nick Boles to Ofqual chief regulator Glenys Stacey. The letter refers to a meeting they held in early September at which the Ofqual review of Level 2 Functional Skills was discussed. In the letter, Mr Boles says that 'Functional Skills will continue to be one of the types of qualification that learners have available to them as they progress towards GCSE attainment', adding that 'for students that are not able to achieve a GCSE they must provide a reliable test of their literacy and numeracy skills'. Mr Boles also asked Ofqual 'to offer guidance on how the branding of Functional Skills could be made better'.

Proposals for employer cash contributions to 16-18 apprenticeships may be scrapped

Although Mr Boles has confirmed that routing future apprenticeship funding through employers is 'non-negotiable', he has indicated that plans to introduce mandatory employer cash contributions of one third towards 16-18 apprenticeship training and assessment costs could be scrapped, particularly if it resulted in employers 'being put off taking on apprentices'. Prime Minister David Cameron recently tasked Mr Boles with creating 1 million more apprenticeships over the life of the next parliament (if the Conservatives form the next government), taking the total number of apprentices to 3 million by 2020. However, with much of the growth likely to come from small businesses, there have been renewed concerns that the current proposals are a barrier to entry for many, and both the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the National Audit Office (NAO) have warned that the number of 16 to 18 apprenticeship starts could fall dramatically if employers were made to make a contribution to the cost.

Continued fall in the overall number of apprenticeship starts

Meanwhile, it appears that the overall number of apprentices is falling of its own volition. The recently published BIS First Statistical Release (FSR) shows that the numbers of all-age apprenticeship starts fell by 13% last year. In 2013/14 the total number of apprenticeship starts was provisionally put at 432,400, a fall

of 62,700 compared with the 495,100 apprenticeship starts at the same time in 2012/13. Total apprenticeship starts have now fallen for the second year with the final figures for 2012/13 standing at 499,800, a drop of 2% compared with the 510,200 starts in 2011/12. However, there are variations within the figures for 2013/14. The number of 16-18 apprenticeship starts shows an increase of 5%, to 117,800 since last year, while the number of 19-24 apprenticeship starts fell by 3% to 156,900, and the number of 24+ apprenticeship starts fell dramatically by 29% to 157,700.

All main parties propose an increase in apprentice wages

The Labour Party says that if it wins next year's general election wages paid to 16-18 year old apprentices will be increased by 23% (from the current £2.73 per hour) to £3.36 per hour. Apprentices aged 19+ already must be paid at the national minimum wage (NMW). This will be more strictly enforced and the penalties imposed on firms for non-payment of NMW to apprentices will be increased. Meanwhile BIS Secretary, Vince Cable is proposing a 40% increase in pay for apprentices aged 16 and 17, to £3.79 per hour (which is the current NMW rate for 16 and 17 year old workers in 'permanent' full time employment). The proposals come in the wake of a Low Pay Commission (LPC) review of all current NMW rate levels, as part of which, the LPC was asked to look at simplifying the wage rate structures for apprentices.

Young people are prepared, or are not prepared, for the world of work.

The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) annual workforce survey of almost 3,000 companies has revealed that:

- 88% of employers believe school leavers are 'unprepared for the world of work' and 'lack the skills they need to succeed in the workplace'.
- 76% of employers cite the failure of schools and colleges to organise meaningful work experience as one of the key reasons young people are unprepared for work.
- 57% of employers said that young people are 'lacking in basic soft skills', such as communication and team working.

John Longworth, the director general of the BCC, said that as a result of this, many businesses feel that hiring a young person is a 'risky move'.

On the other hand, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) survey of more than 90,000 employers has revealed that 55% of businesses who recruit 16 year old school leavers feel that they 'are well prepared for work', rising to 74% for FE college leavers. Michael Davis, the chief executive of UKCES said that the research showed that 'most businesses that recruit young people are pleased with their skills'.

Against this, City and Guilds has recently published the findings of a survey commissioned by YouGov to ascertain parents' perceptions of the relationship between their children's education and their future employment prospects. More than 3,500 parents were surveyed and the findings have revealed that:

- 70% of parents feel that their children are sufficiently prepared to make decisions about their future at the age of 16.
- 64% of parents went on to say that they did not believe that their children were 'being provided with what employers want, such as communication and teamwork skills'.
- 49% of parents think that 'employers care more about work experience than good examination grades'.
- 36% expressed concerns that their children 'do not understand the link between their education and their future careers'.
- 72% of parents thought vocational qualifications were just as useful as degrees in allowing people to start a successful career.

The last bullet point backs up similar findings from yet another poll, this one being the recent Edge Foundation poll of 1,000 parents, which revealed that parents' knowledge of vocational routes and recognition of qualifications such as NVQs and apprenticeships 'is improving'.

Ofsted proposes further changes to the way in which colleges in England are inspected

Ofsted chief Sir Michael Wilshaw has launched another consultation on further reforms to the FE and Skills inspection regime in England. This latest set of proposals means that on average there will have been two substantial changes to FE and Skills inspection frameworks or guidance in every year since Sir Michael was appointed to the post in January 2012. Sir Michael says that his latest proposals are intended to provide a 'much clearer focus on ensuring that good standards have been maintained'. He said that this

would be achieved by inspectors carrying out ‘frequent but shorter’ inspections of FE and skills providers that were judged as ‘good’ at the end of their latest Ofsted inspection. Introducing the proposals, Sir Michael explained that ‘at the moment, it can be five years, or even more, between inspections for a good school or provider. This is too long. It’s too long for parents and employers. It’s too long for us to spot signs of decline and it’s too long for improving institutions to show that they are now delivering an outstanding standard of education’. He went on to say that the short inspections being proposed would mean that Ofsted ‘can spot signs of decline early and take immediate action’, and that ‘If we find significant concerns then we will carry out a full inspection’. Sir Michael added that ‘Where we think the school or provider may have improved to outstanding we may also decide to carry out a full inspection to confirm this’. Sir Michael explained that ‘the shorter inspections would be carried out by no more than two inspectors on site for one day’ and ‘would take place every three years’. He went on to say that inspectors would ‘particularly focus on whether leadership teams had identified key areas of concern and have the capability to address them’.

However, *no* changes are being proposed to the inspection frequency of those providers classified as ‘outstanding’, ‘inadequate’ or ‘requiring improvement’. Interestingly, under changes brought in last month (September), it could be up to two years before providers ‘requiring improvement’ (Grade 3) are re-inspected. (Previously this was a maximum of 18 months). This means that although ‘good’ providers will potentially be inspected more frequently than before, providers ‘requiring improvement’ will potentially be inspected less frequently than before. Providers judged to be ‘inadequate’ will continue to be re-inspected within 15 months, and providers judged as ‘outstanding’ will only be inspected if Ofsted identifies that ‘there is something going wrong’.

The consultation also covers proposals for a move to a single Common Inspection Framework (CIF) for nurseries, schools and colleges, along with proposals for four categories of judgments. These are:

- Leadership and management
- Teaching, learning and assessment
- Personal development, behaviour and welfare
- Outcomes for children and learners.

Responding to the proposals, a spokesperson for the AoC said that it was likely that the FE sector would ‘need to be convinced that training provided by FE colleges, particularly for adults in the workplace, can really be judged on the same basis as the education given to school children’.

With specific reference to FE, Ofsted is consulting on proposals to award separate grades to providers in respect of their apprenticeship provision. This is because Ofsted apparently has ‘serious concerns’ about the quantity and quality of apprenticeships being delivered. Also, in the wake of the transfer of apprenticeship funding to employers, Ofsted feels that there is ‘a need for more information to be made available to employers to help them make better informed choices as to which providers to work with’. Ofsted is also consulting on proposals to award grades for 16-19 study programmes, traineeships, adult-learning programmes, employability skills and community learning. However, Ofsted has said that there are no immediate plans to introduce routine no-notice inspections for colleges.

The Ofsted consultation document is called ‘Better inspection for all - consultation on proposals for a new framework for the inspection of schools, further education and skills providers and registered early years settings’ and can be downloaded from the Ofsted website. The consultation period ends on December 5.

Significant problems still exist at some ‘Trojan horse’ schools

Unannounced monitoring visits conducted by Ofsted inspectors says the action plans for improvements are still ‘not fit for purpose’ in some of the schools inspected in the wake of the ‘Trojan horse’ incident. Five of the schools were placed in special measures and, in the monitoring reports inspectors say that:

- At some of these schools staff still ‘do not trust each other’
- In one school ‘safeguarding remains a serious concern’
- It had ‘taken too much time to appoint new governors and senior leaders at these schools’
- In most schools, ‘too much poor practice remained unchallenged during the summer term’
- In some schools ‘very little action had been taken to address the serious concerns raised about their performance’
- While plans had been put in place to improve the curriculum at each of the five schools, they often ‘lacked the detail required to ensure that effective action would be taken to actively promote

- fundamental British values and tolerance of those of different faiths and beliefs'
- In one school, religious education GCSE students 'were still required to teach themselves for options other than Islam'
- In another school, 'little had been done' to tackle segregation between the sexes and encourage boys and girls to sit together in lessons and share ideas'
- In some schools staff were still teaching classes for which they were not qualified'
- In most of the schools there had been 'little improvement to the unbalanced curriculum being taught'.

At a meeting of the House of Commons Education Select Committee at which the Ofsted monitoring visit findings were discussed, Nicky Morgan, the Education Secretary for England said there were 'always lessons which could be learned from such an affair', but added that 'Ofsted inspectors needed to be trained in the government's strategy to prevent radicalisation'. Committee members also asked whether the 'speed and process of academisation' had played any part in what had happened in Birmingham. Ms Morgan denied that this was the case. She 'rejected any suggestion that any of this situation in Birmingham is caused either by academisation, or because of changes in local government finance'. However, the Shadow Education Secretary for England, Tristram Hunt, responded by saying that it was 'utterly incomprehensible that six months after these serious concerns became public, the government has still not taken action' and was still 'putting children at risk from radical, hard-line agendas'

Extremist Task Force Code of Practice is shelved

The code of practice being developed by the government's Extremism Task Force 'to help ensure young people are not exposed to intolerant views and the risk of radicalisation' has been abandoned. The DfE was expected to publish a draft version before the end of the year, however the plan has now been shelved because officials say that 'putting it into practice proved too complex'. The proposed new code of practice was thought to be particularly difficult to enforce in 'supplementary schools'. (These are comprised of evening classes, weekend schools and private tuition centres where 'thousands of children spend hours each week being taught after school and at weekends about a specific faith or culture' and which operate outside the mainstream education system). Instead, the DfE says that 'existing regulations will be strengthened' and that Ofsted 'will target those schools where there is particular concern'. The DfE has also announced that it is also working on plans that make it mandatory for all schools, including faith schools to offer teaching in a minimum of two different religions (which some might be two too many).

Meanwhile, Ofsted has carried out unannounced inspections of three independent Islamic schools in the London borough of Tower Hamlets. The no-notice inspections were carried out at the request of the DfE and were not part of the standard inspection regime. Inspection reports have not as yet been published, but it seems that concerns had been expressed that the emphasis being placed on pupils being required to memorise the Koran may have resulted in the school curriculum being insufficiently broad and balanced.

New HE quality assurance and inspection systems to be introduced

Universities are autonomous bodies and are responsible for their own standards. However since 1997 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has had a role in checking that these standards are maintained. A QAA inspection of a university is a very different affair to the inspections of schools and colleges carried out by Ofsted. For example, whereas Ofsted has been actively considering whether a day's warning allows schools and colleges too much time to prepare for inspections, the QAA often warn universities of an impending inspection several years in advance. Also, although judgments on the quality of teaching are made in the QAA report, university lecturers are not actually observed teaching their classes.

The various UK higher education funding councils have now jointly announced a review of how the quality of provision in universities will be monitored in the future. They are also commencing a tendering process inviting bids from organisations interested running the university inspection system with from 2017 onwards. This is the first time that the contract for running university inspections will have been put out to competitive tender, and the announcement raises the prospect of a new HE inspection system being introduced that will be carried out by an inspection body other than the QAA. The funding councils say they want the new inspection arrangements to be 'risk-based, proportionate, affordable, and low burden'. There is also likely to be a split in the current UK-wide system of university inspections, with England, Wales and Northern Ireland developing a different inspection process to that being developed in Scotland.

The funding councils say that the proposed change comes in the wake of more consumer pressure from students paying much higher tuition fees, the anticipated increase in the size of the HE sector next year

with the removal of limits on student numbers, and the recent rapid and significant increase in the number of private HE providers needing to be inspected.

University management and union representatives have been both swift and vociferous in their opposition to any increased level of inspection, arguing that 'Higher education would certainly not benefit from an Ofsted-style inspection regime'. A spokesperson for the Russell Group of universities went further and said that any new system being introduced should require 'less inspection and bureaucracy, and not more, for older, well established institutions'. She went on to say 'Our universities will not flourish if they are over-regulated' and argued that 'inspection resources should be focused where problems of quality are most likely to occur'.

A spokeswoman for the QAA said that the agency would bid for the contract and went on to say 'We look forward to continuing the development of quality assessment in universities, protecting the public interest, and supporting the UK higher education sector's international reputation for excellence'.

QAA says that almost one third of further education colleges offering HE courses are 'failing'

There are currently more than 200 FE colleges in England that provide higher education courses. This partly reflects the government's strategy to allocate 'tens of thousands' of HE places to FE colleges in an attempt to provide more lower-cost degree places' (defined as having annual tuition fees of £7,500). When limits on HE student numbers are completely removed next year, it is likely that the anticipated expansion provision will include even more HE places in FE colleges. However, the Quality Assurance Agency, says that of the inspection reports published thus far, 14 out of 45 colleges had received 'failing judgments'. These judgments apparently include comments such as 'requires improvement to meet expectations' or 'does not meet expectations'. However, the QAA also said that of those colleges that 'passed', a 'relatively high proportion' received 'commended' judgments. The QAA is expected to publish a full analysis of its HE in FE inspection findings next month. The QAA says that inspections of HE in FE colleges were carried out using exactly the same review process as used in universities.

Responding to the QAA findings, Nick Davy, the Higher Education Policy Manager for the AoC, said that 'only a very small proportion of all the individual judgments across the FE colleges were outright failures' and that 'more than 20% of colleges had received commendations'. He also drew attention to the results of a student satisfaction survey carried out by HEFCE which suggests that FE colleges are providing an 'outstanding experience' for higher education students, with 12 FE colleges being amongst the top 20 for providers of HE courses

BIS Secretary is 'relaxed' about HE student loan non-repayment rates in England

Earlier this year, the government revised downwards the estimates of the proportion of HE student debt in England that will ever be repaid. Experts have calculated that if the HE student loans non-payment figure exceeds 48.6% the government will lose more money than it gained by tripling English university tuition fees to £9,000 a year. David Willetts, the previous universities minister has now said that the rate of non-repayment of HE student loans 'was near the point at which the increase in fees would add nothing to government coffers' and Adrian Bailey, the chairman of the BIS Select Committee, has warned that this was a 'financial time bomb' that the government 'needed to face up to'. Responding to these concerns BIS Secretary, Vince Cable said 'These losses will not crystalize until 30 or 40 years' time, when I'm well over 100'. Asked to explain what he meant by this, Dr Cable said that he was confident that HE loan repayment rates would recover as the economy grew, and although many in government have been worried about the rising estimates for loan write-offs. Dr Cable said that 'in the real world, I don't think it actually affects things' and quoting the economist John Maynard Keynes, he went on to say that 'in the long term we are all dead'. Dr Cable added that 'in the future, the world may change in ways we can't predict and that there were 'a lot of things I lie awake at night worrying about. This is not one of them'.

Graduate tax more efficient than student loans says Institute of Economic Affairs

The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), not to be confused with the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), says that in England student loans financed by the taxpayer should be scrapped and replaced with a tax on earnings that would be individual to the graduate, and that the proceeds of this tax should be paid directly to the university that provided the graduate with tuition. The IEA says replacing student loans with a levy on future earnings would improve value for money for students, because, 'with a direct interest in the future income of their students, universities would invest more time and money in helping them do well in the jobs market'. The IEA goes on to say that the scheme would also 'encourage universities to offer

greater flexibility in terms of the nature, length and focus of degree-course subjects' and would 'encourage students to consider more part-time options, leading to a rise in participation'. The IEA also argues that universities should be free 'to charge whatever they liked' in tuition fees so that they could develop a wide range of courses, ranging from 'advanced, high-cost courses that require significant individual contact time to low-cost online courses that can be completed quickly'.

Parents are cutting down on their 'basic outgoings' to pay for their children's university costs.

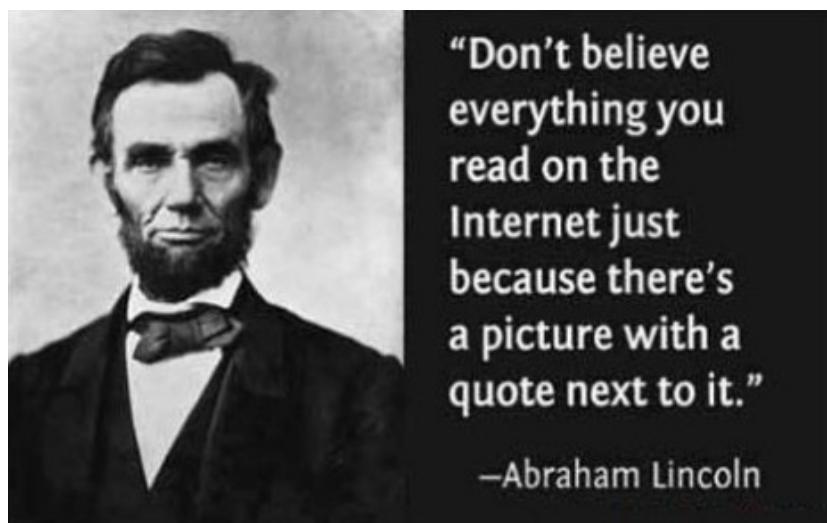
The credit reference agency Experian has published research showing that around 20% of parents of HE students in England have faced financial pressures in supporting their children whilst at university. Although, loans are available for English students via the Student Loans Company to help cover the £9,000 annual tuition fees, students also have to cover their living expenses such as rent, food and utility bills (universities in central London advise students that basic living expenses are likely to be in excess of £1,200 per month). The Experian research suggests that this is 'putting many families under pressure' and can be 'particularly tough if a family has more than one child in higher education at the same time'. The research also says that 'too many parents underestimate how much their children's university costs will affect them' and that 'around two in five families are having to cut back on basic outgoings' in order to support their children. The research goes on to say that about half of parents reported having to pay more than £5,000 towards their child's university costs and that around 10% reported borrowing or using credit cards to cover the expense.

Former principal reads newsletter in bath

Brenda Sheils, the former principal of Solihull College tells me that she reads the **Click** newsletter in the bath whilst drinking a glass of cava. She told me not to mention this to anybody, so I won't.

And finally....

FELTAG, not to be confused with E-Skills UK, NILTA, BECTA or JISC (or FERL or FETL, obviously) has recommended that a condition of funding requirement be placed on colleges to increase the proportion of courses delivered on-line to 10% in the first instance, eventually rising to 50%. For those students who, in the future, will be doing more of their learning on-line, here is some advice:



Alan Birks – October 2014

As usual, the views and opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those held by Click

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