

Sector Developments

More area reviews announced.

Following on from area reviews of Birmingham and Solihull, Greater Manchester, the Sheffield City Region and Tees Valley, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has confirmed that the next area reviews will cover the Sussex Coast, the Solent and West Yorkshire regions. Dates for the London area review are still to be announced, but apparently the London Mayor, Boris Johnson, will be leading it. Learning of this, one principal said that the prospect of Boris chairing the review could be 'amusing', and with another principal described a visit from an area review team as being a bit like 'Ofsted on speed', it is good to see that the FE sector has not quite lost its sense of humour, even if it is of the 'gallows' variety.

Area reviews and mergers

It appears that 'a smaller number of larger and more resilient colleges' remains one of the key outcomes that ministers are looking for from the area review process. It was initially believed that mergers of colleges arising from area reviews would have to be 'Type A', (where both or all corporations involved in a merger are dissolved and an entirely new entity is created), rather than 'Type B', (where one corporation remains and absorbs the assets, liabilities and employment duties of the other corporations involved, which are then dissolved). BIS has now confirmed that the department has 'no preference' as to the type of merger and that it will 'be left to college boards to decide collectively which is the best option for them to adopt'. Skills minister for England, Nick Boles, has even gone out of his way to say that colleges 'have nothing to fear' from mergers, although most of the staff working in them might just take some convincing of this.

Area reviews and Ofsted

Many thought that Ofsted might suspend its schedule of FE and sixth form college inspections while the area review process was being carried out. However a spokesperson has confirmed that no mercy will be shown and that Ofsted will proceed with its current inspection schedule as planned throughout the entire period when area reviews are being carried out. The spokesperson went on to say that although Ofsted *will not* be involved in recommendations or decision-making arising from area reviews, and *will not* be a part of area review steering groups, Ofsted *will* be represented on the *area* review advisory groups and *will* provide inspection outcome data on the FE and sixth form colleges for area review steering groups to use.

Area reviews and the FE Commissioner

Meanwhile, the FE Commissioner, Dr David Collins, who with his rapidly expanding team of FE advisors is leading on the area review process, has given an indication of the scope of the work of area review steering groups. Speaking at the recent Higher and Further Education Show, Dr Collins said that this work included an evaluation of:

- Leadership and management within the colleges involved in the review
- The potential for rationalisation of the curriculum across colleges within the area
- The potential for implementing shared services and shared use of premises
- The financial implications of the changes required as a result of the reviews, and how colleges should respond to this.

During his speech, Dr Collins also said that he had identified issues with the background knowledge of some principals. He said that some came 'from a curriculum route' and were 'weak on the finance side', while others came from 'the finance side' but were 'weak on the curriculum side'. He said that this 'doesn't matter if you have got a very strong team around you' but warned if the management team as a whole were weak the college 'was at risk of getting into difficulties'. He went on to say what has been clear when we have gone around the colleges in trouble is that they had not only failed to address the historical situation of poor management they had also failed address issues in respect of the need to improve efficiency.

Area reviews and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC)

Giving evidence to the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC), Martin Donnelly, the permanent secretary for BIS, was asked to 'look ahead' and to say how he expected the FE sector to look once the area reviews had been completed. His response to committee members was to say that it was 'clear there is a lot of pressure on the FE college sector to adjust to changes in funding and also changes in local need'. He went on to say, 'I also think it is pretty clear that the number of colleges is likely to continue

to decrease'. Mr Donnelly said 'we don't have a target for this' but added that it 'was likely that there will be significantly fewer of them'. Mr. Donnelly said 'our main concern is that we end up with a number of very resilient colleges able to provide a very high quality service'.

A number of PAC members drew attention to the fact that the area reviews appeared to exclude provision delivered in school sixth forms and private training organisations. Liberal Democrat spokesperson for Education John Pugh, asked whether applications to open or expand school or academy sixth forms would take into account the findings of areas reviews if, for example, an area review found that no more 16-18 provision was needed in the area. In response, Chris Wormald, the Department for Education (DfE) permanent secretary said that 'area review findings would not influence the decision to approve a new school sixth form at this moment'.

Local council undertakes its own area review

Reflecting concerns about the exclusion of school sixth forms and private trainers from area reviews, Brighton and Hove City Council has commissioned its own review of post-16 provision, which does include school sixth form provision and private provision. The council intends to submit the results of its own review to the steering group of the Sussex Coast area review, which includes eight general FE colleges and three sixth form colleges.

PAC to investigate the 'deteriorating financial health of the English FE sector'

A report entitled '*Overseeing financial sustainability in the FE sector*' was published by the National Audit Office (NAO) last July. The report reveals that 110 colleges had operating deficits in 2013/14 compared with 52 in 2010/11. The report went on to say that the proportion of colleges assessed by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) to have 'inadequate' financial health rose from 5% to 12% over the same period. The SFA was criticised in the report for being 'too slow to spot problems with colleges finances' and 'failing to check the realism of their over-optimistic forecasts'. The NAO also claimed that SFA intervention 'once it found that a college's financial health was inadequate often lacked sufficient impact'. The report can be accessed in full via the following link:

<http://www.nao.org.uk/report/oversight-of-financial-sustainability-in-the-further-education-sector/>

Commenting on the NAO report, the new Public Accounts Committee (PAC) Chair, Meg Hillier said 'I do not believe it is any exaggeration to say the future sustainability of the FE sector is at risk of financial meltdown'. The PAC has decided to carry out its own inquiry into the financial health of the FE sector in England. Thus far, the PAC has taken evidence from representatives of organisations such as BIS, the Department for Education (DfE), the Education Funding Agency (EFA) and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). The PAC has also taken evidence from three FE college principals. The terms of reference for the inquiry appear to focus on ascertaining the extent to which the relevant departments and agencies have:

- 'Taken responsibility for protecting the taxpayers' money invested in the sector'
- 'Achieved the correct balance between prevention and intervention'
- 'Robust plans in place for creating a sustainable college infrastructure for the future'

Unfortunately, the PAC seems to be placing less emphasis on ascertaining the extent to which colleges have been, and still are, systematically underfunded for the complex job they are required to do.

Meanwhile, the SFA anticipates that the number of colleges assessed as having 'inadequate financial health will continue to increase' and that 'on current trends, it could reach around 70 colleges by the end of 2015/16'. The SFA also says that it has 'provided around £45 million in loans for struggling colleges', most of which 'has not yet been repaid'.

Government Spending Review

Government departments are currently engaged in looking for savings to enable the Treasury to cut £20 billion from public spending. It is expected that the government will announce the results of the spending review on, or around 25 November. After this, DfE and BIS ministers will have to make their own decisions about how to allocate whatever is left. Because BIS and DfE post 16 is not protected, this will inevitably impact on FE and sixth form college 2016/17 funding, although it is possible that final decisions on this may not be made until February 2016, or even later.

Spending Review negotiations between the Treasury and spending departments are carried out in private,

but it is known that there is a target to cut post-16 spending by between 25% and 40% over the next 4 years, and it is difficult to see where this cut can be made from without it resulting in very significant further reductions in provision. In a submission to the Treasury on behalf of its members, the Association of Colleges (AoC) has warned that the actual level of savings that can be gained from mergers recommended by area reviews 'may be less than the government is anticipating' and goes on to say that 'funding cuts could be made 'more manageable if funding allocations were made on a three-year cycle to coincide with future government spending reviews'. The AoC argues that this would 'allow colleges more time to plan ahead and to minimize disruption for their students'. The AoC also says that by making funding cuts with no prior notice (as happened this summer when a further adult skills budget cut of 3.9% was announced) colleges were placed in an impossible position.

Meanwhile, it would seem that in some of the meetings held with review teams during 'Wave 1', college principals were asked to model the effects of further cuts to EFA 16-18 funding of 10% and further cuts to SFA 19+ funding of 40%. It is unclear whether this is just scenario planning, or is indicative of the actual level of funding cuts yet to come. Perhaps the civil servants who advised former BIS Secretary, Vince Cable to 'get rid of FE', because 'no one would really notice, might yet get their way.

'Colleges in Crisis'

A rather unsympathetic 'File on 4' article on the worsening state of FE college funding was recently broadcast on Radio 4. The content was not particularly flattering to colleges and more or less suggested that FE was responsible for its own problems. For those of you who are not yet sufficiently depressed about the prospects for the sector's survival, you can listen to the programme via the link below. (*Thanks to Mike Hopkins, Principal of South and City College, Birmingham, for providing details of the link*).

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06gri93>

The new Shadow Cabinet and FE

Speaking at the recent Labour Party Conference, the new Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn called for universal access to a system of fully funded lifelong learning. The new Shadow BIS Minister, Angela Eagle and the new Shadow Education Minister for England, Lucy Powell both promised to 'fight cuts to the FE sector' and to deliver 'a more joined-up approach to future FE policy'. Ms Powell warned delegates that they were witnessing the 'deepest, most severe cuts to post-16 education ever seen', and that 'campaigning to protect FE funding' would be one of her 'top three priorities'. Gordon Marsden, the new Shadow Skills Minister for England also pledged to campaign against FE funding cuts and argued that area reviews 'were predominantly motivated by the severe funding cuts in further education'. He warned that colleges should not be 'forced into shotgun marriages', and went on to say that that the reviews should also take into account post-16 provision in schools and in private training organisations.

Notwithstanding the obvious need to win the next general election, and then to identify the sources of funding required to meet these promises (and assuming, of course, that the politician's pledges are kept), the level of support expressed for the FE sector by members of the new Shadow Cabinet is somewhat more encouraging for than that of the previous one. For example, at a public meeting held shortly before the general election, the former Shadow Education Secretary for England, Tristram Hunt, was asked if it was likely that a future Labour government would reverse government cuts to FE funding. His answer was 'no'. Then again, he has been the subject of recent vociferous criticism for suggesting to the Cambridge University Labour Society, that the Labour Party would be better run by an elite drawn from the top 1% in society (such as, for example, Cambridge graduates).

More FE research centres to be established

FE staff struggling with funding cuts and worried sick that area reviews will mean that their college (and their job) could be merged out of existence, will no doubt take comfort from learning that a *third* FE research facility has now been launched. FE research facilities currently provided by the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) and the Centre for Vocational Education Research (CVER), which is based at the London School of Economics, have now been joined by the new 'Centre for Post-14 Education and Work' based at University College London's Institute of Education. And there's more. A *fourth* FE research facility is in the process of being set up by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) and is currently at an 'advanced planning stage'.

Anyone who might have concerns about possible unnecessary duplication in the provision of FE research

facilities can put their minds at rest. This is because research activity will be divided between the various centres in the following way:

- The new Centre for Post-14 Education and Work will 'focus on the relationship of FE with work' (including 'vocational, academic and baccalaureate qualifications, and adult education'), and will 'promote a more inclusive approach to post-14 curriculum and lifetime learning'.
- FETL will provide 'independent research for FE, by FE thinkers to make better tomorrows for the sector, its leaders and its task'.
- The CVER 'aims to provide a world-class research hub focusing on vocational education'.
- The ETF's Vocational Education and Training Centre (VTC) is in direct response to a recommendation made by the Commission for Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL).

The Head of Research at ETF says she is 'delighted by the growth in research within the sector', and that ETF's own research strategy will 'complement and support the work of other partners who share our agenda around a research and evidence-based culture in our sector'. A spokesperson for FETL (not to be confused with FELTAG or FENTO) said that she is also 'delighted by the arrival of fellow travellers' in providing 'good quality, independent FE sector research'.

IfE granted the 'Great Seal of the Realm'

Not only has the Institute for Further Education (IfE) been granted a Royal Charter, it has now also been granted the 'Great Seal of the Realm'. This means that the IfE (not to be confused with the now defunct IfL) is now legally entitled to refer to itself as 'the *Chartered* Institution for Further Education (CIfE)' and can recommend that the 'Royal Seal of Approval' (not to be confused with the 'Great Seal of the Realm') be given to high-achieving FE institutions that can demonstrate that they meet the standards set by the CIfE (and, of course, can afford the expense and time involved in applying for yet another quality kite-mark).

An Institute is born

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has merged with the Centre for Social Inclusion (Inclusion). Following the approval of members of both former organisations, the new merged body will henceforth be known as *'the Learning and Work Institute'*.

Devolution and FE

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, budgets are devolved from the UK government in Westminster to the national governments of those countries via the 'Barnett Formula'. Their representative bodies (eg the Scottish Parliament) will then decide on how the funds devolved to them will be spent (eg to provide free university tuition). However budgets cannot be devolved to an English national government because there isn't one. Instead, the UK government is proposing to devolve budgets to 'combined authorities' within English regions. For those who may be unaware of what a combined authority is, it consists of a partnership between individual councils or groups of councils, plus Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), plus other key stakeholders based within a defined geographical region of England. As part of the requirement for the devolution of funds, the UK government requires that an elected mayor heads each combined authority. As at the end of September, the UK government had received bids from 38 regional groups seeking to be designated as combined authorities in order to be eligible to receive devolved budgets.

One of the first combined authority proposals to be approved by the UK government is that of the Sheffield City Region, and Treasury ministers, South Yorkshire politicians and the chair of the LEP have now all signed the Sheffield City region devolution 'deal'. The 'deal' contains some very specific details in respect of skills budgets. Key points of interest include the following:

- From 2016/17 there will be local commissioning of outcomes from the devolved 19+ adult skills budget. Outcome agreements with providers (including colleges) will replace the current system of funding based on qualifications. Providers will receive their funding as a single block allocation.
- From 2017/18, the UK government 'will work with the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority to vary the block allocations made to providers within an agreed framework'.
- From 2018/19, there will be full devolution of funding, with local responsibility for budget allocations and outcomes made by the combined authority. However, this will be within a 'national framework of statutory entitlements and data collection', so that government can collect outcome information.

- The combined authority will be given full responsibility for all European Union funds devolved to it.

Other combined authorities, as they are approved, are likely to seek powers similar to that given to the Sheffield City Region combined authority. However, there are still several English devolution issues that remain to be resolved. For example, after the Barnett Formula has determined budget allocations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the combined authorities in England will need to bid against each other for a share of the remaining funds. This has given rise to concerns that the English regions may become embroiled in a potential bidding war with each other. It is also possible that future devolution deals in England may conflict with the spending priorities of the UK government departments and agencies that just deal with English issues. One example of this can be seen in the current reluctance of BIS and the DfE to devolve budgets for 16-18 year olds, apprenticeships and FE loans. The SFA and EFA also say that if post-16 budgets are to be devolved to combined authorities, they should to be allocated to providers on the basis of the new SFA and EFA funding models.

Finally there is the issue of the 'West Lothian Question'. In addition to having their own national governments, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also return 117 MPs to the UK parliament in Westminster. In the absence of an English parliament, these MPs can, and frequently do, vote on matters that just affect England. For example, legislation introduced by the Blair government to charge (and then subsequently raise) university tuition fees in England was only passed with the support of Labour MPs representing Scottish constituencies. This was despite the fact that MSPs in Scottish Parliament in Holyrood had previously voted to retain free university tuition in Scotland. Also, although many abstained, some MPs from elsewhere in the UK voted to support of legislation introduced to abolish Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) for disadvantaged 16-18 year olds in England, even though their own national governments voted to retain EMAs.

For those of you who may be interested in 'devolution deals' in the English City Regions (and how it might apply within your own region), a copy of the 17-page Sheffield City Region deal can be accessed by the link below:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/466616/Sheffield_devolution_deal_October_2015_with_signatures.pdf

BIS proposes another performance measure

BIS has launched a consultation on a new performance measure that is intended to complement the existing Qualification Success Rate (QSR) measure. BIS officials say that under the existing arrangements 'minimum standards, based on current qualification achievement rates are typically set below the levels that a good or average performing provider is achieving'. The new outcome measures 'will focus on learner destinations into further learning, into or within employment (including apprenticeships), learner progression to a higher level qualification, and the level of earnings achieved following the completion of a course'. A spokesperson for BIS said that 'by introducing minimum standards for learner outcomes, we expect to provoke transformational improvements in the provision that is delivered'. The spokesperson went on to say, 'where providers are not delivering provision that gets positive outcomes, they will face intervention action' by the SFA, the EFA, Ofsted, or the FE Commissioner (or possibly all four). The consultation will run until 2 December. The consultation document entitled '*Adult further education: outcome based success measures - next steps*' can be accessed via the link below:

<http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/adult-further-education-measuring-success-detailed-proposals>

QSR to be renamed

To add to the fun, the SFA has announced that the QSR is to be re-named the '*Qualification Achievement Rate*' (or QAR). The SFA says that the new name will be applied to 2014/15 data 'in preparation for the introduction of a broader range of success measure in the future'. On learning of this, one slightly confused ex-principal missed the point completely and said 'if a change of name for the QSR really is necessary, the SFA should have given it a nice name, such as *Doris*'. He went on to explain that not only was *Doris* a much more user friendly name, it also happened to be both his late mother's name, and the name of one of his wife's deceased cats.

Further doubts cast the future of the SFA

The future of the SFA seems to be once again in doubt after a report of an internal review of BIS

commissioned by the consultancy firm, McKinsey was leaked to the Guardian newspaper. The report contains details of a strategy for BIS in the period to 2020, and is alleged to involve a reduction in operating costs of between 30% and 40%. The report says that this will require a reduction in the number of agencies within BIS from 45 to around 20, along with a corresponding reduction in the number of premises BIS operates in from. The plans are thought likely to affect the SFA, since if all goes according to the government's plans, by 2017 there will be an 'employer routed funding system for apprenticeships and a regional devolution programme for everything else that the SFA currently has responsibility for'. The Guardian says that SFA and other BIS staff are currently being consulted on the proposals, and that a detailed implementation plan will follow early next year.

Ofsted inspections in 2014/15 imply deteriorating General FE and Sixth Form College standards

Figures recently released by Ofsted reveal that:

- 64% of general FE colleges (GFEs) inspected in 2014/15 were rated as either 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement'. This is up from 38% in 2013/4.
- The number of GFEs judged as 'inadequate' increased from 5% to 10%.
- None of the sixth-form colleges (SFCs) inspected in 2014/15 was judged to be 'outstanding',
- The proportion of SFCs rated 'inadequate' increased from 3% in 2013/14 to 20% in 2014/15.

Commenting on the apparent deterioration in standards, a spokesperson for the AoC Association of Colleges argued that the figures for the two years were not comparable because whereas 81 GFEs had been inspected in 2013/14 the number of GFEs inspected in 2014/15 had fallen to 48. The AoC spokesperson also referred to the increased demands placed on colleges in respect of providing English and mathematics for those students who were required to re-sit these subjects. A spokesperson for the Sixth Form Colleges' Association (SFCA), said the figures had been 'skewed by Ofsted's focus on colleges that were rated as requires improvement', and went on to say that Ofsted was endlessly 'raising the bar for inspections'. The spokesperson said that 'endless government policy changes and funding cuts probably won't be helping matters, either'.

Ofsted report is critical of apprenticeships

Ofsted has published its latest report on apprenticeships entitled '*Developing Skills for Future Prosperity*'. Launching the report at the West Midlands CBI Education and Skills Conference, Ofsted Chief Inspector for England, Sir Michael Wilshaw, was highly critical of apprenticeships as they were currently being offered, saying that 'very few apprenticeships are delivering professional level skills in the sectors that need them most' and arguing that the growth in the number of apprenticeships had 'diluted their quality'. He went on to say that 'many low-skilled jobs were now being classed as apprenticeships' and that 'others were used to accredit the established skills of people who have been in a job for some time'. He said that low-level apprenticeships were 'particularly common in service sectors, like retail and care', and did 'not provide sufficient training that stretches the apprentices and improves their capabilities'. He went on to say that 'an apprenticeship isn't endless tea making, shelf stacking or envelope stuffing. It is not an induction course, or a six-week in house training scheme. It is not a badge for doing what is already being done. An apprenticeship is quality training, delivered over a long period, which meets real business needs and is regularly assessed by experts'.

General FE was singled out for special attention. Sir Michael asked conference delegates 'why is it that so many local firms are forced to rely on imported skilled labour and find it impossible to find the right capabilities locally? Who is to blame for this?' He then answered his own question by saying, 'We are increasingly seeing providers, especially general FE colleges, failing because they're not engaging with local businesses and not updating their courses to match local needs'. He accused colleges of 'dishing out dubious qualifications of little economic relevance', although he was curiously silent on the possibility that universities might be dishing out dubious degrees of little economic relevance, perhaps because HE is not within his scope of responsibility. Following in the footsteps of Sir Andrew Foster, Sir Michael also advised colleges to become more specialised, saying that when colleges concentrate on specialisms that meet local employment needs, standards invariably rise'.

Sir Michael said that low-level apprenticeships were 'a waste of public money' and that 'poor quality training programmes for people aged 25 and above' involving 'widespread use of government cash to subsidise low wages on apprenticeships for older learners had got to stop'. He said that providers had to be held to account 'far more rigorously' and warned that 'Ofsted would not shy away from reporting failures'. Sir

Michael called on funding agencies and the government to 'be prepared to withdraw finance from those employers and providers who abuse the system' and urged the government 'to be radical in its reform of this sector', saying we've indulged in mediocrity for far too long and we should no longer accept it. He argued that there was a need for a 'complete overhaul of the system for delivering apprenticeships', and referred to apprenticeships in Germany and Switzerland as examples of good practice.

Commenting on the Ofsted report, Skills Minister for England, Nick Boles said 'Putting an end to poor quality apprenticeship training lies at the heart of our reforms of apprenticeships'. He said that 'Ofsted's report backs up the findings of our 2012 review and provides further evidence for our decision to put employers rather than training providers in the driving seat'. However he went on to warn employers that they would still have to spend apprenticeship levy funding 'with a registered training provider who is on the SFA register' and that Ofsted would have 'a continuing role in inspecting those registered training providers'.

A copy of the Ofsted report can be obtained via the following weblink:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/469814/Apprenticeships_developing_skills_for_future_prosperity.pdf

Almost one third of employers oppose apprenticeship levy

A survey of 275 employers each with at least 250 employees recently carried out by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has revealed that while 39% support the government's plans for an apprenticeship levy, 31% are opposed to it and the remaining 30% are undecided. Within these figures 31% of employers thought that the levy would lead to a reduction in their investment in other areas of workforce training and only 20% thought the levy would help to improve the quality of apprenticeship training. The CIPD report concluded that 'boosting both numbers and quality at the same time will be a significant challenge for the government'.

Meanwhile, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has expressed its strong opposition to the levy, and national organisations representing public service organisations (eg universities and local authorities) have asked to be exempted from having to pay the levy. An announcement on the timing, scope and rate at which the proposed apprenticeship levy will be collected is expected in the forthcoming Autumn Statement.

Apprentices get a pay rise

From the beginning of this October, apprentices aged 16 and 17 saw their National Minimum Wage (NMW) increased from £2.73 to £3.30 per hour (a 20% increase). The NMW rate for apprentices aged 18-20 increased from £5.13 to £5.30 per hour and the NMW rate for apprentices aged 21 and over increased from £6.50 to £6.70. Commenting on the increase BIS Secretary Sajid Javid said 'we are making sure that every part of Britain benefits from our growing economy and today more than 1.4 million of Britain's lowest-paid workers will be getting a well-deserved pay rise'. However, a spokesperson for the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) was less welcoming of the increase, saying that it was 'important to ensure that opportunities for increasing the number of apprenticeships were not being reduced because the salary costs had become too high'.

Proportion of apprentices aged 25 and over returns to pre 2013/14 levels

The proportion of apprentices aged 25 and over has returned to the same levels as that prior to the failed extension of the 24+ Advanced Learning Loans system to adult apprentices that was widely acknowledged to have been the cause of the contraction seen in the numbers of apprentices aged 24+ in 2013/14. Figures published in the Statistical First Release (SFR) reveal that in 2014/15 there was growth in apprenticeship numbers across all age groups, but that the biggest growth was among those aged 25 or above. Over the year the 25+ age group made up 42.6% of all apprenticeship starts (compared 36.5% in 2013/14, and 44.9% in 2012/13).

Reform of Functional Skills

Functional skills were introduced in 2012 to provide non-GCSE flexible study programmes for adults and young people wanting to return to education and to help them gain qualifications in literacy, numeracy and information technology. More than one million functional skills qualifications were awarded in 2013/14 and

they are currently a core component of apprenticeships and traineeships. For a period, the future of functional skills qualifications seemed to be in doubt, however the government has now decided they will be 'reformed' and retained. Skills minister Nick Boles has asked the ETF to assume responsibility for the further development of the qualifications, which will be made available from 2018. The ETF says that it will 'consult on a new set of national literacy and numeracy standards in 2016' and that this will 'form the basis of the renewed qualifications'. The ETF will also work with Ofqual, employers, education providers and teachers, in order 'to ensure the qualifications will deliver a high standard of teaching and learning'.

National Infrastructure Plan for Skills in England

HM Treasury has recently published its '*National Infrastructure Plan for Skills*'. Since the document is intended to provide analysis of skills needs across different occupational sectors in England you might be forgiven for asking why BIS did not have responsibility for this. Nevertheless, the document may prove useful to those in colleges with responsibility for strategic planning and/or for increasing the college's level of employer engagement and responsiveness. A copy of the document can be accessed at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/464354/NIP_for_skills_final_web.pdf

The new Shadow Cabinet and schools

The new Shadow Education Secretary for England, Lucy Powell told delegates at the recent Labour Party conference that there would be 'no more free schools under a future Labour government' and that academy chains would be 'made more accountable'. She said that free schools were expensive and 'often not in the areas where school places are needed. Ms Powell went on to accuse the government of 'willfully neglecting its basic duties of providing a school place and teachers to teach' and said that it was 'no wonder there was a crisis in school places when local authorities have neither the means or the resources to open or expand good schools'.

Meanwhile, despite the fact that Ofsted have judged more than a quarter of existing free schools to be 'inadequate' or 'requiring improvement' the Conservatives have pledged to open 500 more free schools by the end of this Parliament. Commenting on Ms Powell's conference speech, a Conservative Party spokesman said that she had 'confirmed that the Labour Party did not have a single idea about how to raise standards in our schools' and went on to say 'rather than trusting heads and teachers to run their schools, Labour would return to the failed model of schools micromanaged by bureaucrats and politicians'.

England gets its 'first new grammar school' in 50 years

Many Conservative MPs have long campaigned for the creation of more grammar schools, arguing that they drive up social mobility by providing high-achieving schools for bright pupils, regardless of where they live or family income. (For those of you too young to remember them, grammar schools are state schools that have a selective intake based on the performance of pupils in entry examinations, usually at age 11 and referred to as the '11+'). In 1988, the then Labour government passed legislation banning the creation of *new* grammar schools. However some local authorities chose to retain their existing grammar schools and the existing legislation allows these existing grammar schools to expand if there is sufficient demand. The Weald of Kent Grammar School in Tonbridge is now using this loophole to in effect 'side step' the ban on new grammar schools and has received government permission to open a new 450 place grammar school 'site' for girls in Sevenoaks, some distance away from the main school. The local Conservative MP for Sevenoaks, Michael Fallon, welcomed the announcement, saying it ended 'the absurd situation of Sevenoaks being the only area in Kent not to have a grammar school' and that it would 'help to ease the growing pressure on school places in west Kent'. But the Labour Party has described the development as a 'hugely backward step' and Ofsted chief inspector for England, Sir Michael Wilshaw said that while he backed the idea of a 'grammar school ethos', it was important that 'selective schools made sure they admit children from all backgrounds and particularly poor backgrounds'.

The development is expected to result in similar applications for 'site' extensions of existing grammar schools in other parts of England, (prompting one observer to comment that 'the schools sector in England already has now has so many different types of publicly funded schools, including local authority schools, academies, free schools, faith schools, university technical colleges, studio schools and career colleges, the addition of more new grammar schools can't make the situation any more confusing'.

Plans for new 'supersize' schools

In response to the burgeoning school age population it has been estimated that almost one million additional primary school places will be required by the end of the decade. As children grow older, this will have a 'knock on' effect on the demand for secondary school places. Figures, obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request made by the Times Educational Supplement, reveal that local councils will also need to find at least 80,000 additional secondary school places over the next four years. As part of their response to this, it has been reported that 'at least 17' local authorities are planning to create new 'supersize' secondary schools. Referred to as 'titan' schools, these new schools are planned to be capable of taking between 13 and 16 forms of entry' and up to 3,000 pupils in total.

A Local Government Association (LGA) spokesperson said that the tight financial climate meant that councils 'simply do not have the cash to build lots of new smaller schools' and that there were 'limits to councils' ability to plan and build schools, because of the academy and free school programme'. The spokesperson went on to say that this meant that many local authorities had 'no choice but to add extra forms of entry to already existing institutions', adding that 'larger schools can be better because they can offer a broader range of subjects'. Schools minister Nick Gibb, when asked if he was concerned about schools of this size, referred to schools in China and South Korea, pointing out that 'their schools are very large and they produce some very high standards of education'. Government ministers have apparently not, as yet, been asked for a view on the impact of the rapidly increasing school age population on FE and sixth form college capacity by the end of the decade (possibly because they think there is a possibility that there may not be any FE or sixth form colleges left by then).

Training for 'Prevent'

The Prevent Duty came into force on September 21, and places a legal duty on FE and sixth form colleges in England to put in place policies 'to prevent potential radicalisation of learners and exposure to extremism'. All staff (including agency staff) are now required to be 'Prevent' trained. However, a recent survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) of its members in English FE colleges revealed that 45% of those questioned had not yet had any training in how to stop students being drawn into terrorism. Education and Training Foundation (ETF) Prevent training modules are now in place (and are free of charge) that will help with reducing the numbers still requiring training. There are 4 modules, one each for governors, support staff, practitioners and leaders and managers, and a provider access system to upload the names of all who need to take them. The ETF training modules can be accessed at:

<http://www.preventforfeandtraining.org.uk/prevent-online-training-modules>

(Thanks once again to Selina Stewart for her ongoing help with this).

Prevent and Ofsted

Ofsted will carry out a 'thematic review of the implementation of the anti-terrorism Prevent Duty in the FE sector', with inspectors on the look out for examples of good practice and being 'particularly interested in the management of the Prevent duty'. During college inspections in England, Ofsted will 'consider evidence that there is a clear approach to implementing the Prevent duty and keeping learners safe from the dangers of radicalisation and extremism as part of the effectiveness of leadership and management key judgement'. The implementation of the Prevent duty will also be considered as an aspect of safeguarding and will influence the judgement as to 'whether the provider's arrangements for safeguarding learners are effective'. Further details, including grade descriptors are available on pages 38-42 is set out in Ofsted's Further Education and Skills Inspection Handbook (available on the Ofsted website).

Government introduces further measures to prevent terrorism

The government says that it expects all organisations (including schools, colleges and universities) 'to do more' to combat extremism and has introduced more measures to combat terrorism over and above Prevent. These include:

- A full review of public institutions such as schools, sixth form, further and higher education colleges, local authorities, the NHS and the civil service in order to ensure that extremists have not infiltrated them. (This is, in part, a response to the 'Trojan horse' scandal in Birmingham).
- Barring convicted terrorists from working with children, young people and vulnerable adults.
- Incentives for schools and colleges to better integrate pupils and students.
- An official investigation into how Sharia law is being applied across the UK (e.g. through Sharia Courts).
- New powers to close down Mosques (and other religious premises) thought to be promoting terrorism

and bookshops that purvey extremist materials.

- Tougher powers for the broadcasting regulator Ofcom to take action against radio and television channels showing extremist content.
- Further powers to require Internet service providers do more to remove extremist material, remove on-line materials promoting terrorism and to identify those responsible for it. (The Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Unit says it 'has removed more than 110,000 online pieces of extremist propaganda since 2010 and more than 38,000 pieces so far this year', and the Quilliam Foundation says that 'Islamic State currently produces an average of '38 unique pieces of propaganda every day').
- Disruption orders to stop individuals engaging in extremist behaviour.
- Compulsory intensive de-radicalisation classes for convicted terrorists on their discharge from prison.
- Extension of powers to take away the passports of 16 and 17 year-olds to prevent them from travelling abroad (if their parents request this).
- Further measures to prevent extremism in prisons.
- Financial support for 'grass roots' organisations opposed to extremism.

David Cameron said that the new strategy was intended to 'target extremism, actively support mainstream voices and address the segregation and feelings of alienation that provide fertile ground for radical ideologies. However, two leading Islamic organisations, the Muslim Council of Britain and the Ramadan Foundation, have both denounced the government's strategy, saying that it 'criminalises and alienates' all Muslims.

Disciplinary hearing for staff involved in 'Trojan horse' scandal

Teaching staff and senior leaders at the Trojan horse schools in Birmingham who have been accused of professional misconduct are currently attending disciplinary hearings held by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL). If the allegations against them are substantiated they could be barred from teaching. The allegations include such things as:

- Distributing worksheets that (amongst other things) told boys that contraception was 'haram' (forbidden) and that girls had to obey their husbands.
- Using school funds to install and using loud-speakers to broadcast calls to prayer.
- Insisting on gender segregation in school assemblies.
- Refusing to teach sex education.
- Pressuring those staff that disagreed with the schools Islamic ethos to leave the school, and then subsequently breaching the school's recruitment policy in replacing them with staff that were more sympathetic, without following the proper recruitment procedures.
- Subjecting pupils to unusual, and disproportionate punishments, including 'being made to stand in the rain' and 'being made to stare at bushes'.
- Potentially misusing school funds to organize a trip to Saudi Arabia.
- Telling pupils that 'we have the true religion' and using the derogatory term 'kuffar' to describe non-Muslims.
- Making derogatory comments about gay people (including saying that they were 'satanic').

The disciplinary hearings are scheduled to last until December.

Supplementary schools teaching religious intolerance 'will be investigated and closed down'

Plans to introduce a voluntary code of conduct for madrassas were shelved by the DfE last year, but now the government is going considerably further, with plans to consult, then legislate to require supplementary religious schools offering eight or more hours of study a week to children in England to register and face what is being described as a 'light touch' inspection regime. In his speech to delegates at the recent Conservative Party Conference, Prime Minister David Cameron said that 'extremist religious supplementary schools were part of a wider problem of segregation within some communities'. Mr Cameron said that he saw 'no problem with children learning about their faith in supplementary schools', but they 'should be having their minds opened and their horizons broadened, not having their heads filled with poison and their hearts filled with hate'. He went on to say that 'some children spent several hours each day madrassas', and that 'if an institution is teaching children intensively, then whatever its religion, we will, like any other school, make it register so it can be inspected'. He said that it was found 'to be teaching intolerance, then be in no doubt, we will shut you down'.

The proposals have been welcomed by the counter-extremism think tank, the Quilliam Foundation, however the Muslim Council of Britain said it had concerns about the Prime Minister's specific targeting of Islamic supplementary schools.

Schools and colleges urged to watch for signs of abuse linked to 'witchcraft'

In addition to safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults from physical and mental abuse, schools and colleges are now legally required to be vigilant in respect of identifying such things as forced marriages, female genital mutilation and preventing radicalisation that might lead to acts of terrorism. To this list has been added abuse arising from accusations of, or forced participation in, 'witchcraft'. The Metropolitan Police has recently revealed there had been 60 crimes linked to 'witchcraft' in London so far this year, compared to 46 in 2014 and 23 in 2013. London is unique in having a police team, created under 'Project Violet', which is dedicated to dealing with this type of abuse. A spokesperson from the Project Violet team, said although 'cases remained small in number, but there had been a significant increase, covering a spectrum of seriousness, including physical injuries and, in the worst-case scenario, homicides as well'. The spokesperson gave examples of abuse that included a boy who had been called a devil child and thrown out of his house by his parents and a girl who lived with her aunt who beat her with a broom because she believed she was the one responsible when her own children were ill. Other victims had been 'forced to participate in rituals linked to witchcraft', some of which had ended in their murder. The NSPCC said 'authorities need to ensure they are able to spot the signs of this particular brand of abuse' and went on to say that 'while the number of abuse cases involving witchcraft is relatively small, they often include horrifying levels of cruelty'.

Degree inflation is 'spiralling out of control'

The number of university degrees awarded at first or upper second honours level in England has consistently increased in the period since tuition fees of £1,000 were introduced in 1998, with the fastest rate of increase being in the period since tuition fees were increased by up to £9,000 per year. At one university the rate of increase in the number of first and upper second degrees awarded has been 84%. A further 15 universities have seen increases of between 56% and 69%. Concerns are now being expressed that the opportunity that universities now have to charge and receive fee levels paid to universities 'up front' by BIS, combined with the abolition of the cap on HE recruitment has led to aggressive competition between universities to recruit more students. This, combined with increasing levels of self-regulation in terms of quality assurance, has resulted in fears that some universities may be tempted to increase the numbers of degrees awarded at the top grades in order to improve their position in university league tables and to increase their attractiveness to prospective students. A survey of staff working in English HE institutions conducted earlier this year, revealed that more than 50% felt that they had been subject to pressure from their managers 'to push up student grades'. Many of those surveyed said that they thought that degree grades were 'spiralling out of control' and have called on Universities Minister, Jo Johnson to take 'action to stop degree inflation'.

UK universities improve their position in world rankings

This may, or may not, be directly related to the above, but the majority of UK universities have moved up the world's top university rankings this year, some by a significant margin. For example, the UK now has 34 universities listed in the Times Higher Education ranking of the world's top 200 institutions. Within the top ten, Oxford University is second place, with Cambridge University in fourth place and Imperial College London in eighth place. Keeping the top spot for the fifth consecutive year is the California Institute of Technology in the US with the remainder of the top ten places also being held by American universities.

Europe has 105 universities in the top 200. Within this total Germany (which now has free university tuition) has 20 universities in the top 200, the Netherlands has 12 (with most degree courses taught in English and with very much lower tuition fees), and France has 12, while Spain and Italy each have 3. Commenting on the data, Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of Universities UK, said 'If we want to maintain this leading position, we must start matching our competitors' increased investment in higher education' (which can probably be roughly translated as meaning that English universities should be allowed to charge even higher tuition fees). Universities Minister Jo Johnson said the improved rankings 'confirm the world-class standing of our higher education sector. Our reforms will ensure that our universities continue to compete with the very best internationally'.

FE colleges help improve access to HE

A report published by BIS earlier this month (October) reveals that that 42% of students who taking HE courses in FE colleges were previously classified as being 'low achievers' (ie had not achieved 5 GCSEs at grade A*-C in school). This means that almost 87,000 disadvantaged young people progressed into HE because of the opportunities provided by further education colleges. The report also says that around 20% of 128,780 learners who progressed into higher education in 2012/13 did so from FE colleges (more than twice as many as those who went on to HE in FE in 2007/08). A spokesperson for the AoC said the report 'highlights that in areas of economic deprivation the role of colleges in promoting the progression to higher education is even more pronounced'. It is unclear as to what the effect the increased competition for students in the university sector arising from the abolition of the recruitment cap will be on the future numbers of HE students opting to study in FE colleges, with some principals reporting that their local universities are making unconditional offers of a place to any student who gains a Level 3 qualification. The BIS report can be accessed via the link below

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/460394/BIS-15-531-progression-of-college-students-in-england-to-higher-education.pdf

EU procurement rules on exam fees could result in colleges facing 'significant financial penalties'

European Union regulations adopted in February require providers to follow strict procurement rules in respect of examination fee contracts with awarding bodies. They rules apply to contracts worth £625,050 or more 'over a reasonable period' (usually taken to mean 4 years or more). From this February, an awarding body can mount a legal challenge if they feel an FE college or other provider has not complied with the EU regulations, meaning that colleges spending more than £150,000 per year on examination fees over 4 years could potentially be liable. (54 colleges spent more than £1 million on examination fees in 2013/14). The AoC is attempting to assist colleges to avoid breaching the EU regulations (and to secure bulk discounts) by setting up central purchasing arrangements for all colleges. However, a spokesperson for the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) warned that centralised purchasing could 'create additional administrative burden, reducing choice and raising costs for both colleges and awarding bodies.

And finally...

Maslow has added another tier to his 'hierarchy of needs'....



...And the United States National Aeronautical and Space Authority (NASA) has released another stunning new photograph of water on Mars



Alan Birks – November 2015

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

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