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Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 5 February 2016



(Welcome to Policy Eye, a nearly weekly service from Policy Watch offering a regular round up of UK education headlines and stories from over the previous 7 days.)

The week summed up

UK education moved into the second month of the new year facing three familiar but substantive issues in the shape of: educational opportunity; skills training; and school systems. Not new perhaps but part of what's emerging as the core education agenda for 2016 and each very much in the news this week.

Educational opportunity first or more precisely social mobility, one of four big items David Cameron included on his shopping list for 2016 (home ownership, poverty and extremism being the other three) and which this week formed the core theme of what is fast becoming the Monday morning 'Assembly' announcements. In fairly blunt language he confronted the issue of discrimination, calling on universities for example to take in more disadvantaged and ethnic minority students and pledging to create a new 'transparency duty' which would see admissions and retention data all published. As the news headlines below indicate, the announcement has not been without controversy and fingers have been pointed in various directions: is it down to universities, what role should government play, how best to help families and so on, but two other reports this week, one from the Sutton Trust on Oxbridge admissions and one from the Social Mobility Commission on the geography of disadvantage, have helped sharpen the sense of urgency and encouraged the PM to push his and his Party's social reforming credentials accordingly.

Second, skills training, another long-term issue and one central to the government's Productivity Plan which received a 'show us your workings' report from the BIS Select Committee this week. Skill shortages remain a concern for many sectors as both the construction and engineering industries indicated this week but the big priority remains apprenticeships as the BIS Secretary outlined when he introduced the Second Reading of the Enterprise Bill this week. The Bill will legislate for the introduction of the Institute for Apprenticeships which along with the strengthening of the brand and the levy is intended to ensure that apprenticeship growth is balanced with quality and funding measures; that at least is the theory.

Finally, school systems, equally a perennial issue and one raised by both the Education Secretary and her opposite number in speeches this week. Arguably we learnt little from the speeches, the Education Secretary continued to express the virtues of the Academy system and in particular the role of multi-academies while the Shadow Education Secretary stuck with the issue of local oversight and accountability. The school system may look quite different by 2020 but the arguments are unlikely to go away.

Top headlines this week

- 'Cameron attacks race bias in courts and universities.' ([Monday](#))
- 'Top universities not to blame for lack of diversity, say state head teachers.' ([Tuesday](#))
- 'Cambridge applicants to face new test.' ([Wednesday](#))



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- 'Labour warns on curriculum diktat.' ([Thursday](#))
- 'We do inflate predicted A' level grades, teachers admit.' ([Friday](#))

People/organisations in the news this week

- The Prime Minister who announced plans to require universities to publish **admissions data** by class, gender and ethnic background under a new "transparency duty"
- Business Secretary Sajid Javid who confirmed that a new Institute for Apprenticeships would be included in the **Enterprise Bill** when he formally introduced the Bill's Second Reading this week
- The BIS Committee who published the **results** of its inquiry into the Government's current Productivity Plan, welcoming it in principle but expressing concern about the failure to include clear milestones and measurable objectives
- The BIS Dept who published a commissioned research **Paper** into the impact of poor basic literacy and numeracy on employers suggesting that in many workplaces the problem was not well understood
- The DfE who published the latest version of its hefty **guide** on setting up a Free School along with the latest list of schools approved to open as a Free School
- Education Secretary Nicky Morgan who **spoke** about the importance of multi-academy trusts in school improvement when she addressed an Academies Conference in Leicester
- Schools Minister Nick Gibb who made a couple of trademark keynote speeches this week, one on the importance of **storytelling** in children's learning as part of National Storytelling Week and the other on the importance of **core learning**
- Shadow Education Secretary Lucy Powell who revealed a little more of her thinking on school accountability, teacher shortages and curriculum changes when she **spoke** at the Education Reform Summit
- The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission who published a new **social index map** of the country showing that far from a simple North-South divide, disadvantage was evident in some leading cities and coastal areas as well
- The Sutton Trust who published a research **Paper** calling for the Oxbridge entry system to be streamlined, standardized and simplified
- Cambridge University who announced that **new admissions tests** would be introduced as part of the application process for 2017 entry
- UCAS who published an update on 2016 **higher ed applications** indicating a small (-0.3%) decrease in UK applicants but a notable (6%) increase in EU ones, following the key mid-Jan deadline
- Engineering UK who published its latest quantitative **report** into the present and future state of the engineering sector arguing that it remains a major net contributor to the UK economy but that concerns about future skill gaps also remain
- The construction consultancy Cast, who will work with the Construction Leadership Council to help encourage more young people to consider a **career in construction**
- The Skills Funding Agency who **confirmed** an additional £25m for providers for 16-18 apprenticeships but nothing for traineeships
- The Education Funding Agency who published further **guidance materials** to help institutions with their 16-19 funding planning



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- The DfE who published the listings of **Key Stage 4 and 5 technical and vocational qualifications** eligible for performance table reporting in 2018 and thus due for first teaching from Sept 2016
- The DfE and Ofqual who published the latest details of GCSE and A' level **assessment arrangements** for subjects due to start in Sept 2017
- The Standards and Testing Agency who published the latest exemplification material to help with **teacher assessment in maths at KS2** this year
- The Education Endowment Foundation who published the latest recipients of funding to test out their **projects** in areas like reading, literacy and science on a wider scale

Word or phrase(s) of the week

- *"I'm too pretty to do maths."* What one phone company decided to put on its new pink phone covers before they were hastily removed following complaints from teachers and others

Quote(s) of the week

- *"Ask yourselves: are you going that extra mile to really show people that yours can be a place for everyone, regardless of background."* The Prime Minister challenges universities and other institutions as he announces plans for a more equal Britain
- *"At every level ours is a small nation characterised by a large divide."* The Social Mobility Commissioner on latest research from the Commission
- *"Vocational education is key to improving productivity and we recommend that the government clearly outlines how it will achieve that this is recognized in terms of policy priority and funding streams."* The BIS Committee endorses the importance of voc ed in its inquiry into the government's Productivity Plan
- *"I come from a family of teachers-my mum was a head, my aunties and uncles, grandparents and others were all heads, teachers or still are."* Shadow Education Secretary Lucy Powell establishes her credentials

Number(s) of the week

- 11%. The % of state school applicants who were offered places at Brasenose College Oxford, the Prime Minister's old College, in 2012-14
- 0.2%. The overall increase in higher ed applications at the Jan 15 deadline compared to last year according to the latest UCAS figures
- 2.4%. The % of employees per workplace undertaking public-funded basic skills training according to BIS commissioned research
- 14.5m. How many jobs in the UK the engineering sector supported in 2014 according to its latest annual report
- 22. The number of Free Schools approved in the latest round announced this week

What to look out for next week

- Education and BIS sub-committee witness session on careers guidance (Monday)



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- BIS Committee witness session with the Business Secretary on the work of the Dept (Wednesday)
- PISA report on low-performing students (Wednesday)