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## Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 19 August 2016



*(Welcome to Policy Eye, a 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

A' level results week of course where the daily news headlines below illustrate the intensity of the build-up.

There's been widespread coverage of the results along with the obligatory photo shots, tweets and other social media that now accompanies the day, but what are the wider take-aways? Arguably there are five.

First, 65 years on from its inception and in the teeth of repeated reform incursions ever since, A' levels remain a critical feature of the English education landscape. Yes, there was a slight 1.7% drop in entries this year but that was down to a drop in the number of 18 year olds. There've been a couple of other trends to note this year including a sharp drop in AS entries as the uncoupling leaves unanswered questions about its future and a further increase in entries for facilitating subjects like maths and computing and drop in other subjects such as modern languages and creative subjects but essentially the A' level stands firm.

Second, and to moderate what's just been said, this year offers further evidence of the growing strength of alternative routes. The Pearson supported Social Market Foundation Report shows a massive increase in the numbers of young people gaining entry to uni with a BTEC especially if combined with an A' level, tempered perhaps slightly by the fact that this is less so for selective universities. Equally, there is enormous momentum building up behind apprenticeships with four major reports out in the last few weeks all extolling their virtues and one, the Barclays/CEBR report pointing to a narrowing wage gap with graduates.

Third, and a follow on to the above two points, young people need access to good careers advice but this is in short supply. The DfE like most schools and colleges has a helpline running but for instance TeachFirst reported this week that advice about HE should start at primary while the Chartered Management Institute reported that less than 50% of young people had been briefed about apprenticeships. We await the Strategy

Fourth, schools remain concerned about two things. One is the constant sense of curriculum reform; delivering against the high winds of change is never easy and is pertinent this year as Progress 8 takes effect. And the other, and the subject of a sharp comment piece in the TES this week, is the new rules around appeals and re-marks. Whether this constitutes A' level markings' dirty little secret as Laura McNerney put it is a matter of opinion and we shan't know for a few weeks until we've seen how the system has worked this year but clearly remains a source of contention.

Fifth, back to universities and university entry and the use of a separate entry test. Cambridge has already announced it will introduce one this autumn for Sept 2017 entry and other universities are looking at something similar perhaps to take the place of the AS. There is of course the Extended Project that many use but a shift to written entry tests, as Russell Hobby noted, raise more issues about the attainment gap.

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## Top headlines this week

- 'Teachers fear A' level results after year of curriculum change.' ([Monday](#))
- 'A' level results 'the most unfair in generations' warn head teachers following changes in appeals.' ([Tuesday](#))
- 'Labour promises return of student maintenance grants.' ([Wednesday](#))
- 'Record university offers as top grades slip.' ([Thursday](#))
- 'Foreign languages A' level slump blamed on cuts.' ([Friday](#))

## People/organisations in the news this week

### General Policy

- [Reassuring noises](#). The government announced, via a letter from the Treasury, that it was safeguarding science, research and innovation project funding applied for before the UK leaves the EU even if projects continue post Brexit
- [More reassuring noises?](#) British Future, the think tank specializing in issues of immigration and integration, announced a new cross Party Inquiry, chaired by Gisella Stuart MP, to look at ways of resolving the status of the 3m EU nationals living in the UK and report back later this year
- [But equally some concerns](#). The Resolution Foundation highlighted some issues Brexit might bring for the labour market in a new report noting that sectors relying heavily on migrant labour such as food manufacturing and domestics may have to adjust their business models and rely more on skills training and technology to survive
- [Free at the point of delivery](#). Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn confirmed his support for more teachers, better early years support, guaranteed adult education and the scrapping of HE tuition fees as part of his proposed free National Education Service in an interview last weekend
- [Return of the EMA](#). Shadow Education Secretary Angela Rayner has also confirmed that a future Labour government would bring back Education Maintenance Allowances and student maintenance grants funded through a small increase in corporation tax
- [Brexit threatens English language schools](#). The FT examined whether Brexit was helping fuel a drop in bookings at English language schools and suggested a more demanding future
- [Would you send your child to a grammar school?](#) YouGov reported on its latest survey on attitudes to grammar schools indicating that over 60% of those polled don't support them although 67% would consider sending their child to one
- [Young people's mental health care](#). The Education Policy Institute published a follow-up report on how the national 2015 mental health strategy was going and reported continuing issues around workforce, funding and fragmentation
- [Watered down?](#) The government published its Childhood Obesity Action Plan along with its consultation on the proposed soft drinks levy but ran into criticism that the Plan to reduce children's sugar intakes by 20% by 2020 and encourage, rather than legislate for business compliance, lacked force



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## HE

- **Myth Busters.** Universities UK Chief Exec Nicola Dandridge tackled five common myths about uni admissions including that fees are going up (no, only adjusting for inflation) and that there'll be a mad scramble for places this year (no, things are steady) in a blog ahead of A' level results day
- **Passports to Progress.** The think tank Social Market Foundation, supported by Pearson, published further research on the growing numbers of people with BTECs especially when added to A' levels, now entering university albeit more at recruiting universities
- **Graduate Premium trends.** The Institute for Fiscal Studies examined how far a growth in the numbers of graduates had affected the graduate wage premium in recent years and found wage returns remaining solid as the employment market adjusted to more graduates but also that future trends were more unpredictable
- **Apprenticeship 'Premium' returns.** In a new report looking at apprenticeship lifetime earnings, Barclays and the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) suggested that the earnings returns for many apprentices was little different to that of some graduates and in some arts areas, even higher
- **Double Jeopardy.** The NUS published the second of its research reports into how the first £9,000 tuition fee students were faring showing many were struggling financially after uni and were moving back to live with their family
- **Anchoring regional skill systems.** University Alliance published the final report in its series looking at regional issues and HE's role within them, looking this time particularly at regional skills planning and HE's role in 'anchoring' regional responses using Greater Manchester as a template

## FE/Skills

- **More on apprenticeships.** The think tank IPPR reported on how the apprenticeship system was shaping up as it works to meet the government's declared numbers target, suggesting four areas of concern (lack of involvement of small employers, quantity v quality, re-badging of existing training, need for better all-through progression)
- **Advanced level results.** Provisional data on L3 BTECs was published to accompany A' level results (see Schools)
- **Silver lining.** Former DfE Permanent Secretary Sir David Bell argued in a comment piece in the TES at the end of last week, that bringing FE back into the Dept could highlight the importance of the skills agenda
- **Changing guards.** Ofqual announced some changes to its senior management team looking after vocational qualifications

## Schools

- **Advanced level results day.** Full data and info from the Joint Council for Qualifications website here
- **Starting early.** Ahead of a forthcoming report with PA Consulting on pupil progression, TeachFirst called for information and advice about going on to higher education to begin formally at primary school with a particular focus from age 14



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- **Any Questions?** Cambridge Assessment, the parent company for OCR, considered the case for suitable exam questions to be ‘crowdsourced’ from teachers more widely rather than through the existing exam committee system, suggesting it might come within the next five years

## Tweet(s) of the week

- “If you are a teenager getting you’re A’ level results today, why are you reading a load of middle-aged journalists on Twitter? Go and get drunk” - [@flashboy](#)
- “Jonathan Simons. If anyone from the media would like an overweight policy wonk to jump for joy on A’ level results day, I am available” - [@PXEducation](#)
- “There are no miracles says psychology teacher. You work you get the grades. You don’t work, you don’t get the grades” - [@tes](#)
- “Mark Dawe: We’re not there yet on the apprenticeship reforms”- [@FENews](#)
- “Reading a book for a few hours a week can add two years to your life”- [@Independent](#)

## Word or phrase(s) of the week

- ‘Snowflake generation.’ The headmistress of a leading school recently called for parents to be banned from university open days suggesting it was helping create a ‘snowflake generation.’ It’s the third time in as many months that the phrase has been used and refers to an over protected generation, young people who, according to Claire Fox of the Institute of Ideas, ‘believe they have a divine right to be protected from anything they find unpalatable’

## Quote(s) of the week

- “Apprentices at the age of 16 and 18 will outstrip the number of people going into Russell Group universities and we’ll see more teenagers seeing higher-level apprenticeships at age 18” – Lord Baker eyes a change in student progression trends
- “We are trying to be confident and behaving as normal” – Professor Michael Arthur, Provost of UCL as universities face an uncertain summer of student recruitment
- “I would expect some turbulence” – Mike Nicholson, Head of Admissions at Bath University adds to the build-up to this year’s A’ level results and university entry
- “England is in danger of introducing an apprenticeship system that would work well in the economy of the 1960s but is not fit for a 21<sup>st</sup> c workforce” – the think tank IPPR assesses the current apprenticeship reforms
- “We should all demand quick and fair appeals if they are needed”- a head master writes about the current exam appeals system
- “I’ll be disappointed if I don’t pass but I will also get on fine in another school” – one of a number of 10 and 11 yr olds interviewed by the Guardian about their thoughts on taking the 11+
- “You’re maybe the best drinker but you’ve got to think: ‘Is it good for you and does it matter?’” – Professor Zhao suggests abstinence from international league tables like PISA



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## Number(s) of the week

- 98.1%. The A' level pass rate this year, the same as last year
- 13.7%. The drop in entries this year for the de-coupled AS level
- 424,00. How many HE places have been offered this year through UCAS at the last count, up 3% against the same point as last year according to UCAS
- £3,304. How much the average students spends in their first 100 days at uni, according to a survey from HSBC, most of it going on rent and food, followed by course materials and nights out
- £293. How much parents spent on average this year on techie gadgets, phones, laptops and so on, to encourage their offspring do well in their exams, according to a survey from Curry's PC World
- £2,200. The average gap in lifetime earnings between apprentices and graduates, narrowing all the time according to research from the Centre for Economic s and Business Research and Barclays
- 69. The new retirement age currently being considered by the German government
- 84%. How many (British) people want EU migrants to stay according to ICM research
- 4%. The fall in the number of employers expecting to increase staff over the next three months according to the recent survey by CIPD and recruitment firm Adecco
- 4.9%. The latest unemployment rate, slightly down on the previous quarter

## What to look out for next week

- GCSE results published. (Thursday)