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Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 23 September 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

Nearly one month into the new education year and policy lines are hardening; this week's developments underline the point.

First and in no particular order, school system reform, the subject of three more important reports this week, continuing fall-out from the Green Paper and continuing questions about what if anything will survive from the earlier White Paper. The three reports include two from think tanks; one from Reform at the start of the week on Academy chains and the other from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) at the end of the week on grammar schools and social mobility. Both are listed below with the EPI report providing significant modelling of the grammar school effect. The other report from an influential head teachers' group takes its cue from its title: an alternative, and wide-ranging, Green Paper. Each make important contributions.

Second, the creation of a new blob. It was Michael Gove who first used the term to describe pressure groups resisting change. In this case the blob, or Parents and Teachers for Excellence to give them their proper name, is not resisting change so much as refocusing it on standards, reigniting the Gove embers around five key principles; autonomy, knowledge, testing, culture and discipline. In a week which has seen a Party Leader and an author condemn tests, it may provide an interesting counterpoint to some current thinking.

Third, mental health, also the subject of two reports this week, one from a Parliamentary Committee on the overall system and the other from the HE Policy Institute on the challenges facing HE students and institutions. The broad picture emerging from both is of a system struggling to cope and the need for much greater continuity of care, in the case of HE as part of the wider student experience

Fourth, and still with HE, Brexit and its impact on a part of the education system which according to the latest global ranking published this week, is performing well above its weight but increasingly worried about its long-term, post Brexit future. According to a survey conducted for the Lib-Dems this week and reported in The Guardian, over 80% of university bosses surveyed are worried about things like future funding, research, international numbers, exchanges, Erasmus and so on. As one put it: "Brexit cuts off our head and the HE Bill cuts off our legs." It's not all doom and gloom, many are drawing up plans for alternative overseas expansion but it seems it's the uncertainty that's hurting.

Fifth, and talking of uncertainty, FE is facing its own upheavals with regional devolution and its impact or otherwise on future skills planning and funding, one of them. This week the PM wrote to the Manchester Evening News to confirm that the northern powerhouse was safe with her while Liverpool announced plans to set up a local Skills Commission. So far, so positive but as a new report on devolution and localism in FE out this week identified, uncertainty hangs over the sector like well... autumn mist.

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Top headlines this week

- 'Independent schools change admissions tactics to spot tutoring.' ([Monday](#))
- 'Two-fifths of business do not understand the apprenticeship levy, survey finds.' ([Tuesday](#))
- 'Education reformers call for more tests and stronger discipline.' ([Wednesday](#))
- 'Oxford tops world university rankings.' ([Thursday](#))
- 'Expansion could dumb down grammars.' ([Friday](#)).

People/organisations in the news this week

General Policy

- [No more SATs](#). Tim Farron made a number of references to education in his leadership speech at the Lib-Dem Conference with calls for an end to the current system of SATs, no return to selection and greater freedom for teachers
- [Joining up the support](#). The Public Accounts Committee added its voice to those arguing for a more joined-up approach when it comes to supporting mental health services, calling for a plan to be in place by 2017/18
- [No Country for Young Women](#). The Young Women's Trust painted what it called 'a depressing picture' of life for young women in its annual survey listing in particular worries about jobs, health, housing and self-confidence
- [Gulp](#). The think-tank Demos published the results of a survey into the drinking habits of young people suggesting that while the amount of binge drinking by 16-24 yr olds is declining overall, it's still considered a rite of passage among some HE students and young office workers.

HE

- [Oxford tops the world](#). Oxford topped the list of world university rankings for the first time in the Times Higher chart, the latest of a series of university 'league tables' published this autumn, which also saw UKHE (with 91 universities listed) performing strongly, Asian institutions continuing to rise but concerns about Brexit beginning to surface
- [In need of help](#). The HE Policy Institute examined the issue of student mental health in a new report which found a growing number of students in need of help and support and universities struggling to cope
- [Developing the skills](#). Universities UK looked at the sorts of skills valued in the market place for graduates and how these are being provided for in current provision, as part of its wider Review of Skills
- [More developing the skills](#). HEFCE published the outcomes of a hefty commissioned report into technical education highlighting the continuing dilemma of both employer demand for, but confusion about, technical skills and calling for greater clarity about skills, routes and pathways
- [Doing the RITs](#). University Alliance and the HE Academy (HEA) held a joint workshop to launch a series of case studies showing how research-informed teaching (RITs) is being used to develop teaching excellence



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- **Prevent.** HEFCE updated its arrangements on how it will monitor and share good practice of providers' implementation of their Prevent duty
- **The Photo Collage.** One of a number of standard posters that tend to adorn university bedroom walls at the start of term and given a lighthearted analysis in the Guardian as to what it says about its host (Answer: even if your current beau is included in the montage you'll cheat on them by half term).

FE/Skills

- **No wobbles on the Northern Powerhouse.** The PM wrote a piece for the Manchester Evening News claiming that far from 'wobbling,' she was fully behind regional devolution including the northern powerhouse...it was just that she didn't believe in putting all the economic eggs in one city basket
- **Players, victims or agenda setters?** Professor Ewart Keep sketched out potential options for colleges in the light of the ever-evolving devolution developments in a new AoC publication on the impact of devolution funded by the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL)
- **Playing by the rules.** The Association of Colleges (AoC,) in a move which could have a bearing on the government's proposals to create new schools, initiated a judicial review of the DfE's decision to fund a new sixth form in an area where there already is an FE and Sixth Form College
- **One becomes two.** FE Week reported that the role of the FE Commissioner is to be split into two, one to focus on interventions and the other on the area review programme, when the current Commissioner steps down in a couple of months
- **Still in the dark about the levy.** The British Chambers of Commerce with support from Middlesex Uni published the results of a survey showing that just seven months away from the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, 39% of employers surveyed are still not sure what it is
- **Mersey moves.** Liverpool City Council confirmed plans to set up a Skills Commission and use devolution money to help create 10,000 local jobs over the next five years.

Schools

- **Grammar schools and social mobility.** The Education Policy Institute (EPI) published a significant report into the effect of grammar schools and emerging from some detailed data analysis to confound government claims about the impact of grammar schools and concluding that the most effective way to raise performance and social mobility is through high-quality comprehensive schools
- **The Alternative Green Paper.** The Headteachers' Roundtable, an influential group of headteachers and school leaders, responded to the recent Green Paper and other education issues by setting out a wide-ranging set of proposals of their own in the form of an alternative Green Paper
- **Parents and Teachers for Excellence.** The name of a new campaign group, formally announced this week and dedicated to shifting the emphasis away from school structures to school standards, through a combination of high-quality teaching, knowledge testing and structured learning
- **Unlocking the chain.** The think-tank Reform published a new report on academy chains, calling for their direct funding, the creation of a single, independent commissioning body and greater incentives to encourage chains to take on struggling schools
- **Primary assessment inquiry.** The Education Committee announced a new inquiry with particular reference to how the latest reforms as well as current SATs are working



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- [Does selective schooling work anywhere in the world?](#) As Professor Stephen Gorard put it in an article in The Conversation, broadly ‘no’
- [Preparing for all eventualities](#). The DfE issued published its latest guidance for school leaders and governors on what to do in case of strike action.

Tweet(s) of the week

- “Coding is to maths what creative writing is to English – Conrad Wolfram” - [@MrMichaelShaw](#)
- “Another chief exec told me today that communication skills matter most – yet they’re still undervalued in our education system” - [@PeterHyman21](#)
- “US colleges are offering colouring books to students to students in a bid to help reduce stress” - [@Independent](#)
- “It’s often said that university is as much about what you do outside of your degree as it is what you do for it”- [@Prospects](#).

Word or phrase(s) of the week

- **Advancing Access**. The name of a new website launched last week by the Russell Group of Universities with funded support from HEFCE. As the title implies, the aim is to help improve access into what it calls ‘leading universities’ as well as help meet government targets on widening participation. A link to the website is [here](#)
- **Sleep consultants**. Potentially the latest support industry, particularly for stressed parents whose babies won’t sleep ...but can come at a cost - £390 a night.

Quote(s) of the week

- “Instead of building an education system, we have built a quality assurance industry”- Lib-Dem leader Tim Farron tackles assessment issues in his Conference speech
- “People don’t want big announcements-they want to know how to get things done” – The Institute for Government takes the electorate’s pulse 3 months on from the EU Referendum
- “This may be a subtly brilliant strategy from our new PM. But I can’t see it” - Ed Balls responds to a question about grammar schools at the launch of his new book
- “We have no experience in running schools so I think it would be a distraction” – the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University reacts to government proposals for universities to run schools
- “Avoid the vacuous statement” – university admissions tutors offer advice to applicants on how best to write a personal statement as the latest annual admissions cycle gets under way
- “Life on the neglected mezzanine floor of the English education system has been one of near-constant adaption and reinvention” – Dame Ruth Silver reflects on life on the shop floor of FE
- “In the event of strike action, the DfE expects the head teacher to take all reasonable steps to keep the school open for as many pupils as possible” – the DfE issues its latest ‘we expect’ guidance for school leaders in the event of a strike



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- “We are not a think tank or policy institute. We are a campaign” – the new Parents and Teachers for Excellence group set out their stall
- “You cannot take education out of politics but it would be good to take some of the politics out of education” – TES columnist John Dunford adds his thoughts on the great grammar school debate
- “Encourage parents, unchain teachers, take away the fear” – author Michael Morpurgo offers his recipe for learning.

Number(s) of the week

- 40%. The number of parents who said ‘no’ to more grammar schools in a survey by Mumsnet with 37% saying ‘yes’ and 23% who weren’t sure
- 14. The number of councillors in Oxfordshire out of a total of 63 who supported a move to bring back grammars according to an article in the TES
- 10. The number of schools required to make an academy chain viable according to research from the think-tank Reform
- 48. The number of listed transferable/employability skills needed by graduates in a report by Universities UK
- 10%. How much Morrisons supermarket is offering students with an NUS card by way of a discount on food and drink (this follows the Co-op which has already launched a similar scheme)
- 51%. The number of young people who said they feel worried about the future (18% higher than last year) according to a survey from the Young Women’s Trust
- 51%. The number of businesses who don’t understand how the apprenticeship levy will work in a survey conducted by the British Chambers of Commerce.

What to look out for next week

- Announcement of Labour leadership election result (Saturday)
- AoC Conference on the Implementation of the Sainsbury Review (Monday)
- Closing day for submissions to the BEIS Committee Inquiry into the government’s Industrial strategy (Tuesday)
- Education session at the Labour Conference (Tuesday morning)
- Leader’s speech at the Labour Conference (Wednesday)
- Launch of Association of Graduate Recruiters Annual Survey report (Thursday).