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Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 3 February 2017



(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

No overriding education headline this week but plenty to talk about including university admissions figures, apprenticeship issues and structural reforms in both FE and HE.

Those January UCAS deadline university admissions figures first, always an important moment in the education calendar as they offer the first real picture of how admissions are going and where this year issues like Brexit and the shift from grants to loans for nursing have upped the ante. The headline figure of a 5% drop in applications compared to the same point last year has provoked considerable comment with the said Brexit, loans and demography all being cited as possible causes and where fears about long-term trends in the market have been expressed.

As ever, the reality is a bit more nuanced. For a start, last year was a bumper year and according to UCAS, at least another 100,000 people are expected to apply through the rest of the cycle. Also, the number of 18 yr old applicants remains buoyant and applications from disadvantaged groups continue to rise. But it's the 23% drop in applicants for nursing, the 10 -20% drop in older applicants and the 7% drop in applicants from the EU that have sharpened concerns. Some of the factors are immediate and obvious, such as the shift to loans for nursing but how far this all signals a new trend, what impact it has on recruiting institutions and what pressures it puts on a reciprocal Brexit deal are the key questions being raised now.

Next apprenticeships, the subject of a prequel to an event next week on the March Budget by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS.) There've been a string of big reports over the last few months, five at least, welcoming the focus on apprenticeships but raising concerns about the impact on costs, quality and standard of a dash for numbers. The IFS Paper adds to these concerns with some expert analysis that challenges some of the current assumptions on training volumes, earnings returns and levy impact. Its overall conclusion, now becoming a familiar refrain, is don't sacrifice quality on the high altar of quantity.

Finally those structural developments in FE and HE, three in particular. First, the Association of Colleges (AoC) has outlined proposals to streamline its regional structure, simplify its fees tariff and focus more on policy and research. The aim is to put the organisation on a sustainable funding footing and concentrate on core issues as the sector goes through one of its more significant periods of change. Part of that change involves the creation of more specialist high-tech institutions in the form of Institutes of Technology. These were the subject of a second Paper this week, this time from the Collab Group of Colleges which set out a blueprint for such Institutes, built around nine features, some of which it argued could be in place before end of the year. And third, HE where Sir David Bell published his report for Universities UK on how to streamline the system of HE subscription agencies as part of a more co-ordinated landscape. Some familiar themes run through all three reports notably the impact of changing market conditions.

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Top headlines this week

- ‘Bad spending decisions by school leaders to blame for poor careers.’ ([Monday](#))
- ‘Apprenticeships policy puts quality at risk, says IFS.’ ([Tuesday](#))
- ‘Institutes of Technology could be up and running by September.’ ([Wednesday](#))
- ‘University applications fall with drop in nursing and EU students.’ ([Thursday](#))
- ‘Schools have no funds to train teachers, says study.’ ([Friday](#))

People/organisations in the news this week

General Policy

- [Brexit White Paper](#). The government published its long-awaited Brexit White Paper building on the Prime Minister’s recent speech by listing 12 principles that will guide Brexit negotiations over the next two years
- [Fuller, working lives](#). The DWP made the case for older workers including adult apprenticeships in a new outline strategy aimed at ensuring the labour market and life styles kept pace with increased life expectancy
- [More on careers](#). The Skills Minister outlined five elements (prestige, quality, responsiveness, support, context) he was hoping to use as the basis for the government’s long-awaited careers strategy due out later this year, in a keynote speech on careers education
- [Living standards](#). The Resolution Foundation published its latest annual report on living standards suggesting that the current mini-boom was coming to an end, living standards for those at the lower end would continue to fall and the outlook for the future was, well, uncertain

HE

- [Latest application figures](#). UCAS published the figures for applications received by the all-important mid-January deadline revealing an increase in 18 yr olds applying from school/college and from poorly represented areas but a noticeable decrease in applications from older applicants, EU applicants and those applying for nursing courses
- [Working 9 – 6](#). Universities UK published the results of a report, chaired by Sir David Bell, looking into the role and effectiveness of a number of different HE sector subscription agencies suggesting a reduction in the number from nine to six along with the creation of a new partnership focused on data management
- [Time to act](#). The HE Policy Institute (HEPI) published a report looking at how technology was enhancing teaching, learning and performance in higher education around the world and proposing ways in which it could be more fully adopted across UKHE



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FE/Skills

- [Planning ahead](#). The Association of Colleges (AoC) invited comments on its plans to simplify fee and regional structures and to focus more on policy and public affairs as part of its plans to create a more sustainably funded model for the future
- [Pitching for IoTs](#). The Collab Group outlined a delivery strategy for Institutes of Technology based on locally determined models that could be up and running in half a dozen regions this autumn
- [Apprenticeship reforms in perspective](#). The Institute for Fiscal Studies issued a reality check on many of the current apprenticeship policy and funding reform assumptions raising a number of concerns about how effective some of the reforms may ultimately be
- [Literacy Works](#). Unionlearn launched a week long campaign of events and activities to help promote literacy both in and out of the workplace

Schools

- [No child left behind](#). Education Datalab published some interesting research on what impact taking pupils off roll before they take exams has on a school's performance table position raising questions about whether this was being encouraged in cases where poor results might drag a school's position down
- [Northern schools](#). The Northern Powerhouse Partnership highlighted the issue of school performance in a new report issued ahead of its forthcoming conference
- [#EBacc down](#). Campaigners adopted a new hashtag to help raise concerns as the government continued its deliberations about extending the EBacc to the majority of pupils
- [Contemporary Transitions](#). The Education and Employers Taskforce in research for Barclays LifeSkills examined the issue of employer contacts at school arguing that they were hugely valuable in helping young people's progress but that too often employer engagement was focused on the better-off
- [Going AWOL](#). The Education Media Centre considered the issue of pupils taking unauthorized absences and any potential impact on performance given this week's Supreme Court case and concluded that some impact was likely but a lot depended on other factors like prior attainment

Tweet(s) of the week

- "Our challenge in skills hasn't been lack of policy but effective delivery says @Pipshow" @FEWeek
- "Primary school encourages students to wear slippers in lessons in bid to improve grades" - @Telegraph
- "Education experts may lack expertise study finds...Fancy That" @tombennett71
- "Giving cash to the little ones will only reap benefits if you don't shaft the secondaries says @miss_mcinerney" @SchoolsWeek
- "Saying we need a debate about this difficult issue is political version of 'please hold, your call is important to us' ' - @rafaelbehr



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Word or phrase(s) of the week

- Leadership. With leadership in certain countries notably under the spotlight at present, Sir Anthony Seldon's talk at the Institute for Government this week on what makes for a good Prime Minister, has attracted considerable interest. Based on his assessment of all Prime Ministers since 1945, he noted that most fulfilled the old adage of political careers tending to end in failure and identified three core features for a successful premiership: get the right people; set the right priorities; and act the part. They are features that as many have noted are helpful to apply to successful leadership anywhere

Quote(s) of the week

- "Our best days are still to come" – the Brexit Secretary introduces the Brexit White Paper
- "A subdued start to 2017" – Markit/CIPS report on the start of the year for the UK construction sector
- "This is a potential win, win, win" – Nick Hillman, Director of the HE Policy Institute on the potential benefits to universities, students and balance sheets of adopting technology in HE
- "A ratio of benefits to costs equal to 26 or 28 to 1 would be extremely high for any area of public policy" – The Institute for Fiscal Studies issues a health warning on some of the government's assumptions behind the apprenticeship reforms
- "The IoT will be agility-led" – The Collab Group on the need for Institutes of Technology to be fleet of foot
- "I think it's very hard to say whether the formula delivers fairness or not because fairness is in the eye of the beholder" – the IFS's Like Sibieta on whether the schools' fair funding formula is really fair or not
- "Some people think of libraries as buildings but it's not just the buildings that make libraries, it's the service within them that's so important" – the All Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries re-launches with a plea to investigate provision in schools and communities
- "Detentions are only one possible response in our repertoire of responses, as a screwdriver is one tool in your belt" – behaviour 'expert' Tom Bennett responds to the controversy over a school's creation of a detention director

Number(s) of the week

- 2.0%. The Bank of England upgrades its growth forecast for the UK for 2017 (it had previously indicated 1.4%) with inflation unchanged at 2.7%
- 9.8m. The number of over 50 yr olds in employment last year, nearly double the figure of 20 years ago according to DWP figures
- 125. The number of leading science and research projects being give government support according to the Business Secretary
- 564,190. The number of people who have applied to UKHE courses by the mid-Jan deadline, according to UCAS, down 5% compared to the same point last year
- 5. The number of UK universities (Imperial, Oxford, Cambridge, UCL, LSE,) listed in the top ten rankings of the most international universities in the world according to the Times Higher, highlighting the importance of internationalism in UKHE



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- 0.1% of turnover. The proposed membership fee for AoC members for the next three years with rebates for larger colleges as suggested by the Association of Colleges under its latest consultation
- 600,000. The number of apprenticeship starts needed on average each year up to 2020 if the government's 3m target is to be met, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies
- 0.37%. the average secondary school budget for CPD (0.65% for primary schools) according to the Teacher Development Trust

What to look out for next week

- Education Questions in Parliament (Monday)
- Institute for Fiscal Studies 2017 Budget Preview (Tuesday)
- Report from the think tank IPPR on adult skills (Thursday)
- Parliament in recess (Feb 9 – Feb 20)