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## Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 31 March 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

Some big developments this week although how much wiser and/or better we feel remains to be seen.

The Brexit White Paper and that letter have obviously been the big political developments of the week but there's been a rush of education activity as well with primary assessment, GCSE pass grades, English and maths resits, Applied General Qualifications and apprenticeship success measures all featuring. Links to all these below but as ever here's a quick taster of some key points.

Primary assessment first, an open sore since at least the Gove reforms of five years ago and one the present Education Secretary promised to tackle. Her announcement last October to review current arrangements and pledging not to introduce new assessments before 2018/19 had taken some of the sting out of the problem. The consultations launched this week are the next step. Building on earlier work by the NAHT and others, they propose non-statutory KS1 tests, rethinking the baseline measure, reducing the burden of teacher assessment and reviewing what's best for those pupils working below current standards. This year's tests are expected to go ahead but the future beckons.

GCSE pass grades next. These surfaced in a letter from the Education Secretary to the Chair of the Education Committee which started out aiming to introduce certainty but ended up generating some confusion. The issue is what in the new 9-1 scale constitutes a pass: a 4 or a 5? Ofqual had done a valiant job in defining this but anomalies remained about which grade would be accepted by employers, universities, resits and so on. In an effort to spike the bubble, Justine Greening declared a 4 a 'standard pass' for recognition and progression purposes and a 5, a 'strong pass' for accountability purposes. In effect, therefore, two pass grades reflecting different purposes and that's where the confusion may lie. [Schools Week](#) and the [TES](#) both have good commentaries on this.

Third, and a follow-on, the recognition of a grade 4 as a standard pass is likely to take the pressure off another problem: that of 16-18 year olds plugging away at English and maths GCSEs with, as last summer's results showed, ever diminishing returns and plenty of frustration. The implementation of Functional Skills has recently been put back a year but the view is growing that these alternative qualifications plus perhaps more on continuing maths, may be announced soon.

Fourth and briefly, no formal announcement but after considerable delay, it now appears that the Applied General qualification route will remain alongside T-levels and continuing to offer an important route for young people. And finally in a hectic week, the government has announced the development of success measures for its apprenticeship reform programme. The first, a Skills Index, will be available this summer.

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## Top headlines this week

- 'Post Brexit Britain needs further education.' ([Monday](#))
- 'SFA and EFA merger confirmed' ([Tuesday](#))
- 'Cash cuts threaten school standards, say MPs.' ([Wednesday](#))
- 'Government proposes scrapping tests for 7 year olds.' ([Thursday](#))
- 'Judge apprenticeships by outcomes not starts, say MPs.' ([Friday](#))

## People/organisations in the news this week

### General Policy

- [Youth employment](#). The Work and Pensions Committee published the results of its inquiry into employment opportunities for young people calling for more apprenticeships, better skills training and support, and for the shortly to be implemented Youth Obligation to be separated from Universal Credit
- [School finances](#). The Public Accounts Committee published a critical report on how the DfE was managing school funding suggesting that it didn't really understand the extent of the problems and had unrealistic expectations
- [Another apprenticeship report](#). The Education and Skill Sub-Committee published its report on apprenticeships calling for a clearer focus on outcomes, a better alignment with regional skill gaps and with Ofqual having responsibility for external quality assurance
- [Good to pass](#). The Education Secretary revised the position on the new GCSE grading scale confirming that a grade 4 would be viewed as a standard pass, for example for English and maths, and a grade 5 as a strong pass for accountability purposes, in the hope of future clarity
- [Two into one](#). The Education Secretary confirmed that the Skills Funding Agency and Education Funding Agency would formally merge and from next month become the ESFA
- [A' level costs](#). The government published a commissioned research report into the sizes and costs of A' level provision highlighting considerable variations in approach by different institutions and suggesting various ways to reduce efficiencies and costs

### HE

- [Open Letter](#). Leaders of the Russell Group of universities published an open letter as Article 50 was formally triggered calling on the government to guarantee as soon as possible, the rights of EU citizens, many of whom work and study in UK universities
- [Nudge letter](#). The DfE reported on its project with the government's 'Nudge' Unit in which current students wrote personally to disadvantaged young people encouraging them to apply to university, and which had some positive effects, particularly in encouraging take-up at selective universities
- [Communication lines](#). The HE Policy Institute (HEPI) published a new Paper looking at the issue of HE and media communications in a digital age concluding that the outputs may be different now but the need for clear communication is perhaps greater than ever



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- [High-level coding](#). HEFCE invited match funded bids to help set up an Institute of Coding able to provide digital skill training at Levels 6 and 7

## FE/Skills

- [Brexit needs FE](#). The Collab Group examined some of the implications of Brexit for FE, highlighting concerns around ESOL, ESF funding and the future recruitment of staff and students and concluding that FE had a crucial role to play in helping provide for the country's post-Brexit skill needs
- [GCSE resits](#). The Education Secretary confirmed that students who pass English and maths at the new grade 4 level, now known as a standard pass, won't have to resit them as had been feared
- [Applied Generals](#). The government quietly confirmed that it intended to retain the Applied General qualification option, where for example many BTECs sit, suggesting the emergence of a triple rather than a dual post-16 qualification set of routes
- [Measuring success](#). The DfE outlined its plans to develop success measures around the four core objectives of the apprenticeship reform programme with the first being available from this summer
- [Apprenticeships by numbers](#). The DfE published details of apprenticeship starts and participation by region and sector for the period 2010 -2015 showing a rise in take-up by small employers and with Health and Social Work being one of the most popular
- [Made in Oxford](#). The Education and Training Foundation announced that its new FE Strategic Leadership programme which will start this summer will be delivered by the Said Business School of Oxford
- [The Area Reviews story](#). The House of Commons Library offered a useful summary of the process and progress to date as the review programme draws to a close
- [Where's the parity?](#) Mark Dawe, Chief Exec of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) argued that the more poorly developed approaches being taken in apprenticeship assessment and T-level development indicated that the vocational route was again being seen as a lesser alternative

## Schools

- [Primary assessment](#). The DfE launched consultations on primary assessment, proposing among other things to scrap statutory assessments at KS1, rethink the baseline measure, look at how best to track performance of pupils working below national standards and reduce the burden on teachers generally
- [More than a Score](#). The group of parents and professionals campaigning for reform of primary assessment called for an alternative, more supportive system based on sampling, teacher moderation and better pupil tracking
- [Key stage 4 shadow measures](#). The DfE published a brief mapping of 2015/16 results on to the revised scores for 2017/18 to provide schools with some context for how this year's Attainment 8 scores might look in the light of the new grading scale for GCSE
- [Land ahoy](#). The government announced the launch of a new property company known as LocatED, to help secure appropriate sites for the government's growing programme of Free Schools
- [Innovation and regulation](#). Ofsted outlined its plans to use information and data sharing as part of the government's sweep to use technology and innovation to improve regulation



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- **ECDL out.** The government revised its approved listing of qualifications for 2018 performance tables by removing the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) a year earlier than anticipated
- **Breakfast clubs.** The DfE published research showing that these work, schools, particularly primary schools, have developed them, they have a positive impact and the next challenge now is to develop sustainability

## Tweets(s) of the week

- “Turning down lights in the evening would do more to help teenagers get out of bed, researchers say” - [@AnnMroz](#)
- “When parents do nothing more than ask ‘how was school?’ they significantly impact student performance [@SchleicherOECD](#)” - [@OECDeduSkills](#)
- “The removal of tea and coffee for staff is a positive predictor for an organization whose finances and/or management is about to fail” - [@WelshGasDoc](#)

## Other stories of the week

- 10 year itch. A couple of weeks ago, the Institute for Government reported on the volume of policy upheaval in an area like FE, noting for example that ‘no organization (in that sector) has survived longer than a decade.’ This week we had further proof of that axiom with the Education Secretary’s announcement of the merger next month between the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the Education Funding Agency (EFA.) Currently the SFA is seven years old, emerging as it did out of the loins of the LSC in 2010, while the EFA was spawned two years later in 2012 from the Young People’s Learning Agency (YPLA) and the Partnership for Schools. Family trees are available

## Quote(s) of the week

- “When we work together and set our sights on a task, we really are an unstoppable force” – the Prime Minister addresses an audience in Scotland on the power of working together
- “Rather than reporting on the ‘good pass,’ we will instead distinguish between a grade 4 as a ‘standard pass’ and a grade 5 as a ‘strong pass’ and report on both” – the Education Secretary on clarifying what is a pass at GCSE
- “In Brexit Britain social mobility is a cold hard imperative” – the Education Secretary spells out the social mobility challenge as Brexit looms
- “It’s extraordinary that the government has not analyzed the regional impact of its new apprenticeship policy which is likely to boost investment in training precisely in those areas where employment is higher leaving unemployment hotspots with proportionately less funding” – the think tank IPPR fears the apprenticeship levy could deepen the north-south divide
- “He holds the corporate funding policy memory and will be hard to replace” – the FE sector reacts to the news that Peter Lauener will step down from the two Funding Agencies once they have merged
- “Delusions” – what the Public Accounts Committee think the DfE have over school funding
- “Already overlooked and seen as lesser to the almighty A’ level, now is the time to make the case for BTEC’s role in widening participation” – wonkhe examine the position of BTECs in the light of T-levels



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- “It would be a real shame to ditch those plans now” – the Education Policy Institute concludes that having come this far, the government should stick with its school funding plans
- “I think it’s critical that we encourage girls to write and let their voices be heard through their stories” – the author Barbara Taylor Bradford helps launch this year’s National Literacy Trust creative writing competition for young girls

## Number(s) of the week

- 77%. The number of UK university staff not happy with the way their institution is run according to a survey by the Times Higher
- 130,000. How many businesses LEPs have supported since their inception six years ago according to figures presented at this week’s LEP Annual Conference
- 11%. The number of businesses, particularly small businesses in rural areas, who suffer from poor broadband connectivity according to a digital survey from the British Chambers of Commerce
- 11.7. The minimum viable average A’ level class size according to recent research from the DfE
- 2. How many pupils are likely to manage a full sweep of grade 9s (the top grade) in all their GCSEs according to a DfE official
- 79%. The number of 12 and 13 year olds who experience some kind of emotional stress after starting secondary school according to the mental health charity stem4
- 42%. The number of Leave voters who would apparently favour bringing back the cane according to a recent survey on Brexit attitudes by YouGov

## What to look out for next week

- The House of Commons on Easter recess
- Third Readings in the Lords of the HE and FE Bills (Tuesday)