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Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 18 May 2018



(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.

SATs, the start of the exam season, Mental Health Awareness Week, National Numeracy Day, alternative routes to university, another busy week of Select Committee sessions; plenty of headlines this week.

“Please remember, when you open your first test on Monday morning, a test is all it is.” So wrote one primary school head as he attempted to reassure pupils at the start of this year’s SATs Week. Debate about the role, value and impact of these tests has never been far away and equally so this year. There have been changes to the writing test this time granting teachers greater discretion, and the Education Secretary has signalled that he intends to take some of the heat out of accompanying accountability arrangements but concerns about the impact of the tests, particularly on pupils, remains. According to social media, the arithmetic and maths reasoning test have been the hardest, but for overviews of the whole thing, these summaries from the [BBC](#) and the [TES](#) respectively are very useful. Schools get their results on July 10.

It’s also been a week when GCSE, AS and A’ level exams began in earnest. This summer will see more of the new style exams taken: 8 at A’ level, 17 at GCSE. They were [praised](#) by Nick Gibb as he ushered in the latest exam season. A’ levels results are published on August 16, GCSE a week later on August 23.

In not unconnected news, it’s also been Mental Health Awareness Week. As Commons Committees indicated last week, the government may have a strategy for tackling mental health but there are question marks about its funding and ambition. Further evidence of the extent of the problem came with the publication of surveys by the NSPCC, Mind, and Institute of Directors among others. According to the NSPCC, for instance, there’s been a sharp rise in the number of primary age children seeking help while the IoD equally reported an increase in the numbers at work seeking help. The core message coming out of such surveys appears to be a lack of clear access to resources and help, an issue for the future.

The National Numeracy charity has been working hard for a number of years now on helping raise standards of numeracy and this year held its first ever National Numeracy Day. It focused heavily on the importance of numeracy in everyday life and how damaging the ‘Oh, I can’t do maths’ admission of guilt can be. If you need a numeracy check-up, it’s worth taking the [Numeracy](#)



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Challenge; it's free, online, and confidential.

On to the final two headlines this week. One was from [Sheffield University](#) looking at how universities can attract and retain students who have progressed through alternative routes. Many of these, and growing, are BTEC students, who often face presumptions about them and their ability. The report has some important recommendations not least on support and transition. And secondly, the Education Committee has been busy again this week with significant sessions on [apprenticeships](#) and the [Careers Company](#).

Top headlines this week

- 'Pupil sitting SATs taught power pose to improve focus.' ([Monday](#))
- 'More BTEC students progress to university.' ([Tuesday](#))
- 'No proof forced academisation works, admits DfE.' ([Wednesday](#))
- 'Apprenticeship starts continue to plummet.' ([Thursday](#))
- 'Home Office axes foreign student survey.' ([Friday](#))

People/organisations in the news this week

General Policy

- [Labour Market Outlook](#). The CIPD and the Adecco Group published their latest quarterly Labour Market Outlook showing an increase in the number of employers looking to hire, little movement on basic pay levels, and skill shortage vacancies remaining high in occupations like scientist, engineer and IT
- [Showing Awareness](#). The Institute of Directors (IoD) reported on its survey of managers as part of mental health awareness week showing a 12% rise in the number of staff raising concerns, with problems with line managers and workload the top two issues
- [R and I](#). UK Research and Innovation (UKRI,) the new organization that brings together the previous research councils and Innovate UK, set out its initial plans for a new era of research and innovation for the UK, built around four themes including: talent, diversity, infrastructure and Global Britain
- [National Numeracy Day](#). The government offered its contribution to National Numeracy Day by confirmed funding for two new (school) maths Hubs, one in Central Lancashire and one in Cheshire
- [Top 5](#). Conor Ryan listed his five favourite/most significant pieces of research commissioned under his tenure as at the Sutton Trust including those on the decline of Sure Start centres, dips in performance by high attainers and apprenticeships, as he headed off to a new role at the Office for Students

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- **BTEC route.** The University of Sheffield reported on its project with local schools, colleges and partners such as Pearson, looking at alternative routes into higher ed, notably via BTECs, arguing that this was a growing trend, that students often suffered from perceived assumptions and that partnership working and teaching support were key areas to focus on for the future
- **Saving for uni.** The online student community, the Student Room surveyed the spending habits of students preparing for university, finding that the student loan, the bank of Mum and Dad, and part-time work, very much in that order were considered to be the three main sources of income for most

FE/Skills

- **Apprenticeship funding.** The DfE updated the guidance to apply from August 2018 which will see the funding bands increased to 30 and bursary support introduced for 16-24 yr old apprenticeship carers
- **Taken seriously.** The Gatsby Charitable Foundation published a report into off-the-job training in apprenticeships, comparing the approach in England with that of the highly regarded systems in Switzerland and Germany, and concluding that such training needs to be taken seriously, incorporate substantial general education and be strongly enforced
- **Latest apprenticeship figures.** The government published the latest (provisional) figures for apprenticeship starts from August 2017 to Feb 2018, showing a continuing drop in the numbers of starts, with 232,700 this year compared to 309,000 for the same period last year
- **Post 16 maths premium pilot.** The DfE invited bids for a pilot project from this Sept to assess how far premium maths funding supports and raises performance for post 16 students
- **Admin costs.** FE Week reported that the London Mayor is planning to take up to £3m out of the devolved adult education budget for London next year to help pay for the costs of managing the budget

Schools

- **You can turn over now.** The Schools Standards Minister heralded the start of the 2018 exam season by stressing the value of the 'new-style' GCSEs in helping support career progression
- **Views from the frontline.** Ofqual invited teachers who've taught both old style and new style GCSEs, AS and A' levels to offer their thoughts on how the assessment processes have gone, to feedback sessions this autumn
- **Scrap maths GCSE.** Former Education Secretary, Lord Baker outlined his thoughts on GCSE maths, suggesting that many school leavers would benefit from 'essential' numeracy and calling for the maths GCSE to be scrapped in favour of a compulsory Core and optional Further Maths set of papers



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- **Hitting the mark.** Assessment ‘expert,’ Daisy Christodoulou offered some thoughts on how to ensure assessment and marking is as reliable as possible in a comment piece on the TES website
- **Grammar schools.** In topical mode, the House of Commons Library Service published a briefing on grammars, covering latest policy developments, arguments for and against, and the current position
- **Autonomous schools.** The LSE (London School of Economics) published a recent research article suggesting that while creating autonomous schools such as academies and faith schools may raise academic standards, it can have a negative impact on pupils who often find the emphasis on formal learning dispiriting
- **Help with research.** The DfE outlined the areas of research it was seeking to pursue and for which it was prepared to commission more work ranging from early years transition, to attainment gaps in schools, to technical education systems
- **How much?** The DfE issued guidance on what schools and local authorities can and cannot charge for when it comes to books, exams, school visits and so on
- **Keeping children safe.** The DfE published a response to its earlier consultation on ‘Keeping Children Safe in Education’ recognizing the need for greater clarification on a number of issues and confirming that further guidance is to follow
- **Struggling to support.** The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) published the results of a survey showing that funding cuts were leaving many schools having to cut back on the levels of support being offered to pupils with 77% reporting a reduction in support staff over the last year
- **Data access.** The government closed off access to the national pupil database, widely used by researchers, while it considers tougher rules and regulations in line with latest developments
- **Changing the name not the quality.** Education Datalab launched two further reports on Progress 8, confirming at the same time that it was bringing its research functions together under the brand name of FFT Education Datalab

Tweets(s) of the week

- “I’m a minister in a rush. Anyone who has ever interviewed @AnneMilton will know that statement from @CommonsEd to be true. Helps to be a fast walker” - @JBelgutay
- “However wonderful your systems and curriculum are, it is your teachers who are our number one asset in schools. Let’s not forget this” - @HeyMissSmith
- “Enjoy (SATs) Day 2 everybody. Everyone should be able to spell their middle names by now at least” - @MichaelT1979
- “Highlight of today’s SATs: a boy’s self-made stress ball exploded leaving him, his table and the floor covered in flour mid-grammar test” - @that boycanteach
- “My mum is leaving it awfully close to the GDPR deadline to ask if I want to opt in to receive her emails, calls and texts” - @sharonodea



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Other stories of the week

- **How to write a good memo.** The FT carried an interesting article last weekend about how to write a good memo and how important they can be in meetings. It quoted two leading exponents of 'good' memos: Winston Churchill and Amazon's Jeff Bezos. Churchill, for instance, at the height of the Battle of Britain, finding himself swamped with papers, issued this instruction about memos: "Keep it short, make it conversational, and the discipline of setting out the real points concisely will prove an aid to clearer thinking." More recently Jeff Bezos at Amazon told shareholders: "We don't do PowerPoint (or any other slide-oriented) presentations at Amazon. Instead, we write narratively structured six-page memos. We silently read one at the beginning of each meeting in a kind of "study hall." Not surprisingly, the quality of these memos varies widely. Some have the clarity of angels singing. They are brilliant and thoughtful and set up the meeting for high-quality discussion. Sometimes they come in at the other end of the spectrum." Now we know. A link to the FT article is [here](#)

Quote(s) of the week

- "I fear that when I take the national numeracy test on Wednesday, as I intend to, my stress levels will be rising" – the Skills Minister prepares to mark National Numeracy Day by taking the test herself
- "The Government's drive for cost savings can itself come at a price: the cheapest bid is not always the best" – two Commons Select Committees report on the collapse of Carillion and its effect on public services
- "Too often we treat problems as though they were an act of God. Yet we reap what we sow." – IfS director Paul Johnson reflects on some of the causes behind intergenerational issues indicated in recent reports
- "Users of the internet emphasize retrieving and manipulating information over contextualizing or conceptualizing its meaning. They rarely interrogate history or philosophy; as a rule, they demand information relevant to their immediate practical needs" – Henry Kissinger outlines his concerns about artificial intelligence
- "Over the coming weeks and months we will develop our data strategy which will be published in September" – the Office for Students gets to work on its data strategy
- "I don't want people to be shamed by poor maths skills - but we need to change the mentality that its funny to be 'crap with numbers" – Money saving expert Martin Lewis helps launch National Numeracy Day
- "I wish pupils all the very best as they prepare to sit these exams and I look forward to celebrating their success in the summer" – the Schools Standards Minister ushers in the start of the 2018 exam season



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- “You can rest assured that because of the hard work you have put in, you should feel confident with these tests” – one head teacher tries to reassure pupils at the start of SATs week

Number(s) of the week

- 2.9%. The average annual rate of wage growth for the first quarter of the year, above that of inflation for the first time in over a year, according to official ONS figures
- 71%. The number of organisations planning to recruit more staff in the next three months according to the latest Labour Market Outlook from CIPD/Adecco
- £18,500. How much the average worker will have ‘lost’ by 2025 as a result of the long-term squeeze on wages, according to the TUC
- £100-£300. The average monthly disposable income of uni students according to the latest survey by the Student Room
- 10%. The increase in productivity that could follow for companies that focus on improving staff wellbeing and mental health, according to a survey by the EEF
- 232,700. The number of apprenticeship starts for the period August 2017 – February 2018, compared to 309,00 for the same period the year before, according to latest provisional figures
- 183. How many referrals for professional mental health help were made on average per school day by schools in 2017/18, according to a survey by the NSPCC
- 32%. How many international school teachers were considering leaving the profession before they moved overseas according to figures from the Council of British International Schools, quoted in the TES
- 11.5%. The persistent pupil absentee rate for state funded primary and secondary schools in the autumn term last year, according to latest official figures
- 10pm. Researchers at the University of Glasgow argued that you shouldn’t use your mobile phone after 10.00 at night if you want a good night’s sleep

What to look out for next week

- ALL Party Parliamentary Group for the Teaching Profession (Monday)
- Education Committee witness session with Nick Gibb (Tuesday)