Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 4 October 2019

(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.

More Conferences this week including of course the Conservatives but also independent schools.

Elsewhere, the Times Higher had an interesting article on what scrapping private schools might do to some admissions numbers, contracts for developing the next wave of T levels were announced and the ESFA looked to strengthen the rules around subcontracting. As for schools, there’ve been useful articles on data and assessment, school system reform and comparing standards across exam boards.

But it’s to the Conservative Party Conference that we head first where a number of education announcements were made with FE, for a change, getting some of the biggest notices.

It’s worth reflecting for a moment why FE is getting its place in the sun at last. Reasons include the fact that both the Chancellor and Education Secretary have studied there, the demographics are about to shift in favour of their core ‘customer’ group, the skills training it offers is forecast to be in demand post-Brexit and a post-Augar bounce has seen politicians recognize the importance of the ‘other 50%.’ It’s no wonder therefore that the sector is looking to design a College of the Future model to take on new challenges.

So what was announced at the Conference for FE? Four, or perhaps five things stand out. First the announcement of a new Skills and Productivity Board to provide expert advice on aligning learning provision with economic need. This comes two years after the demise of the Commission for Employment and Skills but where the inclusion of ‘Productivity’ is key. Second, a further increase in the numbers of Institutes of Technology, still not quite clear about how they’ll operate but the potential is there. Third, a promise to benchmark technical learning opportunities against a supposed competitor country – Germany. Fourth, support for young people with a new Fund and a pilot jobs app. And fifth, a new White Paper on devolution, potentially therefore a further nod towards local planning and delivery.

And so to the other big Conference this week, the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference (HMC) of independent schools. They met of course in the wake of Labour Party proposals to withdraw benefits for private schools and merge them into the state sector. This clearly featured in the Chair’s opening speech which highlighted the contribution such schools make as well providing survey evidence showing plans to scrap such schools were not popular with voters. The Conference went on to consider other timely matters including how young people feel about going off to uni – a mix of excitement but also anxiety – the emergence of another social media challenge facing young people, that of ‘sadfishing,’ posting emotional issues to elicit attention, apparently and the potential of AI to replace exams.
Top headlines this week

- ‘Education Secretary announces plans for vocational training.’ (Monday)
- ‘Sad fishing social media warning from school heads. (Tuesday)
- ‘1,000 outstanding schools not inspected for a decade.’ (Wednesday)
- ‘Teachers spend ‘44 days a year’ assessing pupils.’ (Thursday)
- ‘AI may replace GCSEs in top private schools.’ (Friday)

People/organisations in the news this week

General Policy

- The PM's Conference speech. The Prime Minister briefly referenced education, notably levelling up school funding and supporting FE in his inaugural Conference speech as Prime Minister
- The Chancellor's Conference speech. The Chancellor pledged to increase the National Living Wage, bring forward a new Devolution White Paper and support a new Youth Investment Fund as part of his Conference speech
- The Education Secretary's Conference speech. Gavin Williamson praised teachers, underlined his commitment to raising standards and confirmed his support for FE with announcements about technical education, Institutes of Technology and a new Skills and Productivity Board as part of his Conference speech

HE

- A private school cap. The Times Higher examined what impact Labour’s proposal to place a cap on the number of private school applicants accepted by universities might have on current numbers, suggesting that up to 12 universities would have had to have turned down places
- Transition to university. The Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference and Girls Schools Association published a new survey of sixth formers and their hopes, fears and expectations about heading off to uni with most positive about studying their chosen subject but anxious about things like social life and budgeting
- Visa impact. Aaron Porter, Associate Director at IDP Connect, examined the impact of the government’s recent announcement on re-introducing post-study work visas for international students, pointing to an immediate spike in interest particularly from postgrads from countries like India and Nigeria

FE/Skills

- Supercharging FE. The Education Secretary announced plans in his Conference speech to boost FE by investing in more Institutes of Technology, establishing a Skills and Productivity Board and matching Germany in the creation of technical provision
- Job apps. The government announced funding for a new scheme that uses mobile phone technology to recommend jobs and training for people who want to move up the jobs ladder
• **T level contracts.** The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education announced that City and Guilds and NCFE had been selected to develop and award the next wave of T levels due to be in place from Sept 2021

• **T level providers.** The DfE updated its list of providers due to offer T levels from next year showing 50 providers on course to be in the first wave but a drop in the number due to offer transition programmes

• **Subcontracting.** The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) called on providers to confirm they were working to agreed subcontracting regulations and confirmed that they were completing a review of requirements for next year as they investigate a number of current cases

• **Unrealised Potential.** The Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) reported on its work with the British Council into the role and work of independent training providers both in the UK and abroad, concluding that, as the title suggests, their role is under-appreciated and warrants improved investment and support

• **Lifelong learning.** Robert Halfon, Chair of the Education Committee, outlined a three-part guarantee to help support lifelong learning, comprising an adult community learning guarantee, a part-time higher ed guarantee and an employer guarantee,

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**Schools**

• **Maths schools.** The Education Secretary announced plans in his Conference speech to open up 11 Maths Schools to extend coverage to every region in England

• **Schools cuts.** The coalition of bodies fighting for school funding released further details on the extent of school funding cuts suggesting that despite the recent promised increase, over 80% of schools would still be worse off than they were five years ago

• **Private schools.** Fiona Boulton, Chair of the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference (HMC) highlighted the important role that private schools play in society in her inaugural Conference speech, reinforcing this with survey evidence showing little public support for scrapping such schools

• **System leaders.** The DfE published updated figures on the numbers of Teaching Schools, National Leaders of Education and National Leaders of Governance in the school system in England

• **High Needs funding 2020/21.** The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) updated its guidance for 2020/21 with some clarifications on place and top-up funding ahead of publication of allocations later this month

• **False comparisons.** Ofqual blogged about how not to compare standards between exam boards given recent suggestions from professionals about switching exam board to try and ensure better exam results

• **A new Gateway.** The government published information for users of the new Primary Assessment Gateway, a new website housing admin and information on national curriculum assessments

• **Marking time.** GL Assessment reported that more than 30% of teachers surveyed reckon they spend more time dealing with data and assessment than they do preparing for lessons and called on government and schools to make such processes less burdensome

• **School system reform.** The Confederation of School Trusts published a 10 – year blueprint for reform of the school system which would see schools supported to form Trusts with a single regulator and a standard code of governance

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• **School exclusions.** The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) announced a major 4 – year grant to a group of researchers across six universities led by Oxford’s Dept of Education to examine the impact of school exclusions.

• **Hitting the wrong notes.** Simon Dutton, Chief Exec of music tuition support organization Paritor, highlighted a continued worrying decline in the take-up of music in schools with particular challenges around provision in primary schools.

**Tweets(s) of the week.**

• “You should become a teacher…because it is a profession that creates all others!” - @ottleyoconnor

• “We talk a lot about brave leadership at the moment. This worries me. You should not have to be brave to be a school leader: you should have a full grasp of your craft @PaulWhiteman6 at the @tes” - @Ed_Dorrell

• “Head of one of England’s largest chains of academy schools bans parents from sitting on school governing body to try to drive up standards” - @SianGriffiths6

• “According to research from Birmingham City University, the typical A level music class now has just three students” - @BCUPressOffice

• “He’s only gone and done it. He’s gone full FE” - @JohndickensSW

• “Breaking News: Central London teachers have today been spotted consistently wearing their big coats for outside duties. Temperatures have officially been declared as cold across the UK “ - @louise_a_martin

**Other stories of the week**

• National Poetry Day. There have been a number of activities and competitions to mark this year’s National Poetry Day which occurred this week. Everyone has their favourite, many of which can be found among this listing in The Independent of the 25 most powerful poetic lines, from Oscar Wilde to Margaret Atwood and more.

**Quote(s) of the week**

• “Spreading across the country like tendrils of superinformative vermicelli” – the PM explains his Party’s broadband policy in his Conference speech.

• “We believe in levelling up, skilling-up and opening up” – the Chancellor points to the upsides in his Conference speech.

• “I am setting a new ambition to supercharge FE over the next decade with an aim to overtake Germany in the opportunities we offer to those studying technical education by 2029” – the Education Secretary eyes up the competition in his Conference speech.

• “The selection of the name “T-level” enables us to raise the consciousness of there being parity with A-levels; that it is easily understandable” – new Education Whip Baroness Berridge answers questions in the Lords on T levels.
• “I had hoped I wouldn’t be” – former Education Secretary Damian Hinds tells Schools Week he had hoped not to be sacked as Education Secretary under the Johnson changes

• “The motto on our shield ‘Learn and Live,’ is a call to action; action in a fast-changing technological age” – Professor Tim Blackman, the new V.C. at the Open University, outlines the importance of their mission

• “We are not being churlish, we are just stating the facts. The funding crisis is not over” – ASCL general secretary Geoff Barton on the need to top up school funding further

• “We have become the sort of neighbours who people want to stick around, helping strengthen state schools and communities across the nation” – HMC Chair Fiona Boulton on the important role that private schools play in society, let alone education

**Number(s) of the week**

• £4.3bn. How much the Chancellor promised by way of covering European Development and Horizon 2020 funding in 2019/20

• £2bn. How much is still needed to reverse the cuts to school budgets since 2015, according to latest evidence from the School Cuts coalition

• 68%. How many people think parents should be able to pay for their children’s education if they can afford to, according to research conducted for the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference

• 1,010. How many ‘outstanding’ schools have not had an Ofsted inspection in the last ten years, according to a report from the BBC

• 6 hours, 8 minutes. How much time on average each week teachers spend testing and assessing students, according to a survey from GL Assessment

**What to look out for next week**

• World Teachers’ Day (Saturday)

• Parliament due to be prorogued ahead of the Queen’s Speech the week after (Tuesday)

• Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) Green Budget analysis (Tuesday)