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Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 14 February 2020



(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 Policy Watch last week so two weeks to catch up on and plenty to take in.

Developments from last week have all been listed below so let's stick with this week where there's been plenty to report particularly around Westminster. It includes a Cabinet reshuffle, a series of debates on education matters, some Budget submissions, new developments around online safety especially for children, an update on technical qualifications and further afield, a string of reports and a couple of notable speeches on HE. Just as well next week brings a half-term break and Parliamentary recess.

A lot to take in therefore so here are some pointers.

On the Cabinet re-shuffle, the retention of Gavin Williamson (and Nick Gibb) suggests policy continuation around the 3Fs of Free Schools, funding and FE. The change of Universities Minister continues the rollercoaster there and comes as the sector grapples with future visas, fee levels and global relationships. Diana Beech's '10 things a new Universities Minister should know' [blog](#) is a useful scene setter here. The changes at BEIS and the Treasury are also of interest to education, particularly with the Budget, if it goes ahead, under a month away. Quite how economic planning in a year of four big economic 'moments' – the March Budget, summer Spending Review, Autumn Statement and end of year trade deal - will operate, will be something many in education will be watching closely given previous promises.

Before we leave the noise of Westminster, a couple of other developments this week to take it. First those education debates which have seen MPs discuss such important topics as the [apprenticeship levy](#), [white working-class boys' attainment and social mobility](#), in the less constrained environment of a Westminster Hall debate. Such debates don't necessarily change the world but they do air views. The levy debate for instance saw MPs from all sides line up to offer thoughts on how to make the levy simpler and more flexible, Rob Halfon for example listed half a dozen including an company skills credit, while there was lots of talk about more voc education and role models in the debate on white working-class children.

And second, that [update](#) on technical qualifications which came in the form of the government's response to last year's consultation on Level 3 and below qualifications. It's proving to be a protracted process partly because there hasn't been such an audit for some time and partly because it involves a delicate balance of need versus supply and cost. There'll be further consultation later this year but for the moment Awarding Organisations have six weeks or so to make their case for any qualifications with low or no enrolments they wish to retain before the government withdraws funding for new starts from August 2021.



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Top headlines this week

- 'Call to scrap pen and paper exams by 2025.' ([Monday](#))
- 'Apprenticeships: MBAs for a few come at cost to many.' ([Tuesday](#))
- 'Children who sit too much more likely to get depressed.' ([Wednesday](#))
- 'Education Ministers pull plug on 5,000 post-GCSE qualifications.' ([Thursday](#))
- 'Universities still fail to give ¾ of places to state school pupils.' ([Friday](#))

People/organisations in the news this week

General Policy

- [Ministerial reshuffle](#). The Prime Minister conducted his first big ministerial reshuffle with notable changes at the Treasury, Business Dept and as Universities Minister
- [Budget proposals](#). The CBI outlined its thoughts for what should be in next month's Budget listing proposals in four priority areas: people and skills; the climate; innovation; infrastructure, calling among other things for a major review of the apprenticeship levy, delivery on FE investment and a post-Augar update
- [Core Cities proposals](#). The Core Cities group published its proposals for the forthcoming Budget calling for greater 'fiscal freedom' for cities including a devolved Skills and Employment system and Special Enterprise Zones to help drive local growth
- [More on automation](#). McKinsey and Company reported on the growing impact of automation and the opportunities it can bring for both work and lives, pointing to three challenges that need to be overcome including changing skill sets, rising inequality and a possible backlash, and setting out a blueprint for governments to deploy in future
- [Online response](#). The government published its initial response to the recent Online Harms White Paper saying it was considering giving Ofcom new powers while pointing to other work it was doing in this area such as drafting legislation, developing a media literacy strategy and preparing for a fuller response
- [Online safety Index](#). The DQ Institute, an international think tank specializing in digital intelligence, launched what it claimed was the world's first real-time Child Online Safety Index as part of this week's Safety Internet Day, showing the UK ranked low down in terms of child online safety and disciplined screen use
- '[Smarter, faster, more accessible](#).' The tech body, JISC, published a new report on the future of assessment for further and higher education arguing that it needs to become 'smarter, faster, and more accessible,' setting out five principles in areas like security, accessibility, and authenticity, to help achieve this over the next five years
- [NMW](#). The government announced some (technical) changes to its enforcement procedures for the National Minimum Wage (NMW,) including increasing the compatibility between salaried and non-salaried workers and sharpening the 'naming' of employers who don't pay the full wage



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HE

- **Top of the in tray.** Diana Beech, former Policy Adviser to a revolving door of University Ministers and current Head of Government Affairs at Warwick, listed ten 'crucial things,' in a blog on the HEPI website, that a new Universities Minister should be aware of
- **Still able to study.** The Times Higher reported how some universities were turning to create online learning opportunities for students currently restricted from travelling, suggesting that scaling up at speed could pose a challenge to some institutions
- **The view from here.** Nick Hillman, director of the HE Policy Institute (HEPI) presented a comprehensive overview of the current and future state of UK HE in the annual Queen Mary Drapers' Lecture, suggesting for example that the introduction of fees had helped free up the supply of university places but equally noting big challenges around future research funding, Edtech and value for money measures
- **Hands of support.** The HE Policy Institute published a new briefing note undertaken by the V.C. of the O.U. looking into student welfare suggesting that among other factors, the quality of teacher support and feedback can play a big part in helping improve student wellness
- **Measuring value.** Professor Julia Buckingham, President of Universities UK, used a speech to consider a wider approach to identifying value in higher education, suggesting for example how many of an institution's graduates work in essential public services and how many had started their own business as possible measures
- **Cutting red tape.** UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) launched trials of simplified application processes for research funding in two designated areas: maths and sciences

And from last week

- **UCAS applications.** UCAS reported on university applications this year as of the important mid-January deadline point noting totals up generally (1.2%) against the same point last year with record numbers applying both from outside the EU and from 18 year olds in the UK
- **Part-time learners.** The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a report into part-time adult learners for whom a recent decline in numbers has been a cause for concern, highlighting three areas: better recognition of the needs of such learners, more flexible systems and cost considerations, which could help reverse trends in the long-run
- **Prevent duty.** The Office for Students reported on its monitoring of the first year of the operation of the Prevent duty for institutions pointing to widespread compliance and the embedding of procedures but noting that training and communication were still areas for development

FE/Skills

- **L3 and below update.** The government set out its response to last year's consultation on Level 3 and below qualifications confirming that it was looking to remove new start funding for those qualifications with low or no take-up from August 2021 and inviting Awarding Organisations to make a case, by 27 March 2020, for any they felt should remain
- **Debating apprenticeships.** MPs held a Westminster Hall debate on the virtues or otherwise of the apprenticeship levy with contributions from most of the key members and with calls for greater flexibility, less bureaucracy, greater transparency and continued debate but not necessarily for full reform



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- **Leave the Levy alone.** The Association of Learning and Education Providers (AELP) along with a group of large levy paying employers called for levy policy to be left alone, clear entry points available at all levels, and for 16 – 18 apprenticeships to be funded out of the DfE budget
- **Teacher training bursaries.** The government published this year's details of its initial teacher education bursaries for those preparing to teach key subject areas such as STEM, SEN and English in FE
- **Making an impact.** National Numeracy released its Impact Report for 2019, a year which had seen the charity issue a major new report, host a highly successful National Numeracy Day and record a big increase in the number of people taking the National Numeracy Challenge
- **Learning for all.** The innovation foundation Nesta argued for a new approach to adult learning in the UK as part of its 'Future of work and skills' project, highlighting the issues facing many sectors and age groups and calling for greater regional investment aligned to local needs
- **Supporting 16 -18 provision.** The Campaign for Learning and NCFE published a new policy pamphlet on the theme of 16-18 year olds with a range of leading commentators offering their thoughts on the sort of provision and support needed for this burgeoning group of learners

And from last week

- **T level support.** The government updated its support for the implementation of T levels with the latest figures for what's available through the T Level Capital Fund and further expansion of the T Level Professional Development programme for staff
- **Counting the cost.** The government published a commissioned report into costs and cost drivers across the FE sector finding many colleges, especially sixth-form colleges, let alone particular departments struggling with tight budgets and finite margins and concluding that in some cases, their very survival was at risk
- **Consultation on subcontracting.** The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) launched its intended consultation on subcontracting, calling for views from across post-19 education and training about how this should operate in the future and what, if any, reforms should be adopted
- **Working Futures 2017 – 2027.** The government published its commissioned report into likely future labour market trends and skills where Brexit continues to provide uncertainty but where business and other service activities such as research and IT seem likely to drive future employment growth and where a strong pull towards higher skilled occupations will continue
- **Evaluating National Colleges.** The government published a commissioned report into the initial phase of its National College programme involving five specialist Colleges, suggesting a mixed picture with a number of lessons for future policy such as building on existing institutions rather than rushing to create new ones
- **FE Workforce.** The government confirmed that following consultation it will call on the Education and Skills Funding agency (ESFA) to set up a system to collect data on staff working in FE, as happens in other sectors, which will start this year and become mandatory from the 2021/22 academic year
- **Choosing Voc Quals.** Ofqual reported on its commissioned YouGov survey looking into how and why institutions made decisions about which vocational qualification to offer 16 – 19 year olds with learner needs being the primary driver along with progression potential, capacity and perceived employer interest as other important factors



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Schools

- **Hitting the right notes.** The government announced a Call for Evidence as it sought views on how best to update the current National Plan for Music which runs out this year
- **White working-class boys.** MPs debated the issue of education and attainment for white working - class boys where the need for more role models, careers guidance, and technical and vocational education were all raised and where the government argued in conclusion that its reforms such as improving technical education and strengthening behavioural policies were all helping
- **10 ways to improve accountability.** ASCL general secretary Geoff Barton outlined ten ways in which the school accountability system could be improved including ditching the EBacc as a performance measure and replacing Ofsted graded judgements with narrative descriptors
- **Extending the transition period.** Ofsted announced that it was extending the transition period for schools to determine their future curriculum arrangements giving them two years rather than one
- **Pause for thought.** Recent headteacher and Heads Roundtable member Ros McMullen explained in a blog, concerns that members had about the inspection system and why they were calling on members to consider 'pausing' their work as inspectors
- **STEMinism.** Teach First heralded this week's International Day of Women and Girls in Science by publishing a list of leading supporters of its 'STEMinism' campaign, launched to encourage more girls to study STEM subjects

And from last week

- **Market report.** Ofqual published its latest annual Qualifications Market Report for England for 2018/19 complete this time with a new app enabling users to delve more specifically into qualification types and volumes by subject

Tweets(s) of the week.

- "Next universities and sciences minister (assuming that formation remains) will be the seventh appointment to that post since July 2014" - [@johncmorgan3](#)
- "One of my delegates on my subj leader course today said something utterly brilliant when discussing diffs between leadership and management. 'A great leader makes you feel like they are walking alongside and amongst you; a manager feels you have to go to them'" - [@Emma_Turner75](#)
- "Amazing how you can teach five brilliant lessons, have a really rough time in the sixth, and that's the only thing you carry home in your thoughts. Mad profession. Brilliant. But mad" - [@adamboxer1](#)
- "Adventures in American parenting. My son's day care sent him home with a list of the other babies in his class entitled 'For Valentine's Day.' My son can't yet speak much less write, so the implication is that I, his mom, will fill out cards for a bunch of babies all under age 1" - [@rcallimachi](#)
- "I want to pay tribute to the brave staff who stood by me on lunch duties today. Bitter wind and hail stones like acidic popping candy bouncing off your face. We stood, we shivered, we marvelled at how teenagers were oblivious to the storm and we whooped a victorious cheer on the bell" - [@EldonPrincipal](#)
- "So glad I'm not teaching today. #StormCiara will drive the students crazy. 'Tis very windy. Has anybody got any research on the velocity of windiness and craziness of students?" - [@Xris32](#)



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Other stories of the week

- Amazon time. Last autumn, Amazon launched its Future Engineer programme which includes among things, training for teachers, coding lessons for children, a free robot and a subsidized school visit to an Amazon site. Some have expressed concerns about Amazon's incursion into the world of education, others have welcomed the injection of resources and support. This week a Daily Telegraph correspondent went on one of these school visits and reported back. A link to the story is [here](#)
- Sing a sad song. It may be Valentine's Day but apparently people tend to listen to more sad and gloomy music during February than at any other time. The evidence comes from data collated by Spotify and reported in an article in The Economist [here](#), subscription only. Lana Del Rey anyone?

Quote(s) of the week

- "Very pleased to have been reappointed as Schools Minister by the Prime Minister. Levelling up education standards across the country is essential to ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to fulfil their potential" – Nick Gibb carries on at the DfE
- "The widening skills gap is a problem with no quick fix" – the CBI outlines some issues for government ahead of the forthcoming Budget
- "By 2027, it is expected that 55.2% of jobs will be held by people qualified at Level 4 and above" – the latest Working Futures report plots future skill and employment trends
- "It can feel like a needle in a haystack" – the Education Secretary makes the case for streamlining the technical and vocational qualification system
- "A more transparent breakdown of the levy, and whether it is a net or gross contribution to apprenticeships by the government, would be welcome" – Education Committee Chair Rob Halfon makes a point during a debate on the apprenticeship levy
- "I am concerned that in too many places this is a taboo subject" – Ben Bradley MP introduces a debate in Parliament on education and attainment for white working-class boys
- "Pupils in year two should not be spending their holidays revising for key stage one assessments" – the government responds to headlines suggesting some primary schools were preparing to run Easter revision classes for six year olds

Number(s) of the week

- 1.4%. Final growth figures for the UK for 2019, slightly up at 0.1% on the previous year but with no growth in the final quarter of the year, according to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics
- 68%. How many workers in a survey of those most at risk of their jobs being automated over the next ten years, are unclear about the risk, according to a survey from Nesta and YouGov
- £104m+ How much companies have spent over the last 2½ years putting senior staff through level 7 apprenticeships, according to research from the TES
- 1,300+ How many people a week had signed up to take the National Numeracy Challenge and improve their everyday maths skills last year, according to the latest impact report from the National Numeracy charity



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- 38%. How many young people claim that it's easier to be themselves online than offline, according to research published as part of this week's Safer Internet Day
- 2,000+. The fall in the number of lollipop men and women over the last decade, a victim of austerity, according to the GMB union

What to look out for next week (Special Request)

We are always looking to find ways to improve what we do, and we would welcome your valuable feedback on Policy Watch. Please take a moment to complete this short survey which will be open until 5pm Monday 24 February.

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/Y5MGHWW>

Thank you for your support!