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Pocket Watch – Post-16 faces a blitz of developments

Introduction

Life is rarely dull in FE and the last week or so has proved the point with a blast of fresh announcements covering in order; online learning; specialist or National Colleges; Technical Awards and Qualifications; and fee loans and Traineeship funding. It's not that they hadn't been expected, after all rumours about extending the learning loan in FE have been circulating for some time while the prospect of National Colleges had been the subject of a spoiler alert in Vince Cable's landmark speech in Cambridge a couple of months back but that makes them no less significant. It's often said that skills let alone FE hardly gets the pulses raising on the doorsteps when it comes to an election but a combination of a resurgent economy hungry for skilled workers and an election build-up desperate for new and innovative policies may yet prove the exception this time round.

For those trying to keep up, this is a headline summary of these latest developments.

Learning technology

Here the Government is proposing to beef up the availability and application of 'new' technology in the sector in **response** to the recent FELTAG Report.

Specifically, this means a gradual increase in the use of e-assessment particularly in vocational and apprenticeship provision, the launch of a number of online only trailblazers to test out any funding implications in shifting towards online learning and the development of appropriate performance and inspection metrics needed to accompany such provision. Some small scale capital investment is on offer but the thrust is a move away from contract driven activity towards full-scale responsive and adaptive provision...without of course any diminution of quality standards. A new minimum online threshold for new and revised qualifications will be confirmed later this year.

National Colleges

The development of high-tech vocational training institutes to strengthen the membrane between FE and HE is something politicians have been talking about for some time and has been given added urgency by an economy that has started to grow but which, according to employers is being hampered by a lack of trained technicians. **National Colleges** are the latest response and last week the Government called for expressions of interest.

Building in many ways on the previous Government's National Skills Academies, the Government is calling on interested parties, typically employers, to stump up some cash to help set up these specialist high skills centres in key sectors and is making £50m match funding available over the next couple of years for this. Like the advanced centres already set up for HS2 and nuclear energy, these Colleges will operate where there is evidence of a skills gap at Levels 3, 4 or 5 and will not duplicate core FE provision but will work with colleges in a hub and spoke arrangement where possible. Expressions of interest need to be in by Sept 5.

Technical Awards and Qualifications

Bu by bit in the wake of the Wolf, Whitehead and other Reviews, the Government has been reshaping the vocational and technical offer for young people. The aim has been to simplify and re-purpose such provision and align it more closely to market needs by adopting specified criteria that include clear employer recognition, sharper external assessment requirements and defined learner progression potential. Only qualifications that pass such muster would be recognised for performance table purposes. An update on progress was provided in the Vocational Qualification Reform Plan a few months back and last week the Government added

more detail on **developments** in two specific areas: 14-16 provision and substantial vocational qualifications at Level 2 for 16 -19 year olds.

For the former, the Government is proposing a restyled vocational offer, branded as Technical Awards that 14-16 year olds will be able to take alongside GCSEs. Described as "*broad, high-quality Level 1 and 2 qualifications that equip students with applied knowledge and associated practical skills,*" these will be available for first teaching from Sept 2015 assuming they meet the required criteria in areas like purpose, size, content and assessment. The aim is for students to be able to take up to three of these which could then be used to fill the third 'pot' in the Progress 8 accountability measure. The Government will publish a list of Technical Awards approved for 2017 performance tables, and thus ready for kick off in Sept 2015, this autumn.

For the latter, that's the provision of so-called 'substantial vocational qualifications at L2,' a headline measure that was listed in the accountability arrangements earlier this year for 16-19 year olds, the Government has equally confirmed that these will be available for first teaching from Sept 2015 and counted in performance tables from 2017. Described as "*rigorous intermediate L2 qualifications for post-16 students wishing to specialise in a specific industry, occupation or occupational group,*" these will therefore add a further pathway for 16-19 year olds alongside the traditional academic route, Applied General Qualifications and Tech Levels, let alone Traineeships and Apprenticeships. The ubiquitous flowchart of pathways can be found in the Annexe of the latest Technical Guidance published last week.

Fee/Learning Loans and Traineeship Funding

Advanced Learning Loans have been around in FE for over a year now and although they've since been scrapped for Apprenticeships, the Government claims they've been a success elsewhere: "*take-up for classroom-based courses has exceeded our expectations.*" Of course there have been issues and not all of the information has been as clear as it might have been but the Government believes the time is right to consider extending the loan model to a lower age group, flexing some of the rules and aligning things more closely to the HE fee loan system.

It's therefore proposing opening up the loan system to 19-23 year olds including for those taking a L2, allowing for more than one loan to be taken out at the same time, providing a Sharia-compliant loan system and perhaps most significantly of all, strengthening the FE-HE linkage by re-locating HNs under the FE funding and thereby Learning Loan system. Each of these proposals which are now out for **consultation** until August 21, has its risks. For instance, bringing 19-23 year olds into scope for learning loans runs the risk of deterring young people who unlike the 24 year olds who are already subject to loans, tend to be less clear in their career options; flexing the loan rules runs the risk of individuals stockpiling debt while re-positioning HNs runs the risk of downplaying the proven high level tech route that is so important not just to those seeking technician skills but to the country generally.

For Traineeships, the Government is equally keen to refine some of the funding and eligibility arrangements so that there is a greater focus on what it calls "*positive outcomes.*" Currently the funding comes through two separate Agencies depending on the age of the trainee and the Government hopes that by defining the learning and outcomes of such programmes much more clearly, a greater and more consistent focus on achievement and outcomes can be generated. It's therefore seeking views on alternative funding models with payments spread on programme and on outcome in different ways. It's also intending to extend English and maths funding conditionality for trainees without a L2 up to the age of 24 from 2015/16 as well as providing the option of a Traineeship for a 19-24 year old even if they already have a L2. **Consultation** here remains open until August 14 and the Government will respond in the autumn.

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