

Policy Eye: (Election 2015)



Highlights of week ending Friday 20 February 2015

(Welcome to Policy Eye, a nearly weekly additional service from Policy Watch offering a regular round up of UK education headlines and stories from over the previous 7 days and introduced to keep a special 'eye' on developments in the build up to the 2015 election.)

The week summed up

Nearly two months into this election year and the pattern is becoming clear. An appearance on the Marr Show on the Sunday to set the week's key theme, some follow-up speeches at the start of the week fleshing out the details, a few days of full media scrutiny and analysis and by the end of the week little obvious change to polling positions. 'Let's call the whole thing off and pick it up again with one week to go' blogged Matthew Taylor recently, many may agree.

The theme this week been welfare to work and skills training with added spice coming from the latest set of labour market figures released on Wednesday. Overall the figures which take us up to the end of last year were striking, the employment rate the highest since records began in 1971 adding to the Prime Minister's claim that 'Britain is the jobs factory of Europe.' Look a little deeper and the pattern is not so positive for young people, youth unemployment including that for students up 3,000 and showing few signs of improvement. Unsurprisingly then it was the plight of young people that concentrated minds this week and formed the focus of many of the policy announcements.

The Conservatives concentrated on 18-21 yr olds who have been out of work or training for some time and announced a package of measures that would see these young people put on to community work and/or job search straight away rather than after six months. *"From day one, they must realise that welfare is not a one-way street."* It's an important part of the Party's pitch on welfare reform and would help generate efficiencies that could be fed back into growing apprenticeship numbers.

Labour's response, announced as part of a new industrial strategy, has been to bring back its Future Jobs Fund model that was introduced in the latter stages of the Gordon Brown years and which would guarantee a job for any young person unemployed for over a year. Six months work paid for out of a tax on bankers' bonuses is the claim.

Next week the focus will shift on to another group of young people, university aspirants, with Labour due to announce its plans on tuition fees. This is already attracting garish headlines but neither side will equally want to forget the plight of those other young people who may have been in the spotlight this week but are too often overlooked for the rest of the time; NEETs to some, future talent to others.

Top headlines this week

- 'Britain's biggest primary expanding to take 1,500 pupils.' (**Monday**)
- 'Ed Miliband: Labour will create at least 80,000 extra apprenticeships a year.' (**Tuesday**)
- 'UCAS admissions system to include European universities.' (**Wednesday**)
- 'We must aspire to more grammar schools.' (**Thursday**)
- 'We're offering a new beginning to teachers. Ed Miliband tells TES that Labour would end war on teachers.' (**Friday**)

People/organisations in the news this week

- The Prime Minister who announced that 18-21 yr old NEETs who had been unemployed for six months would have to undertake compulsory community work and/or job search
- The Labour Party who launched a new industrial plan with an emphasis on better training, more apprenticeships, an increased minimum wage, support for LEPs and devolved planning
- The latest unemployment figures which showed another fall in the last quarter of last year for adults but no improvement for young people
- Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown who is promoting a plan drawn up by the education charity World at School, to make it safer for children to go to school in places such as Pakistan
- The House of Lords Digital Skills Committee who in a landmark report suggesting that UK Digital Skills was at a tipping point, called for digital literacy to be recognised as the 3rd core subject in schools and for the internet to be regarded as a utility service for all
- The Guardian who asked five university vice-chancellors if they would support possible Labour plans to cut the tuition fee to £6000 and found little enthusiasm
- The Education Secretary who is under pressure to support plans for a new grammar school in Kent and where an announcement is expected soon
- UCAS now preparing to extend its common application system to include some European universities as well
- HEFCE whose latest report on global demand for English HE showed numbers slightly up for 2013 but with a heavy reliance on recruits from China and Malaysia in particular
- The University of Warwick's Commission into Cultural Value which completed its 12 month inquiry by highlighting fears that creative and cultural subjects were being squeezed out
- John Cridland, Director- General of the CBI, who highlighted the issue of 'devo-cracks' if devolved regional powers did not support plans for growth
- The Skills Funding Agency who set out what steps government and LEPs are taking to support the implementation of Local Growth Deals
- The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) who launched a major review on how the sector should take forward its training provision
- The C/G Alliance who published a report setting out a number of teaching and learning recommendations that could help 'remake' apprenticeships
- The think tank CentreForum who called for vocational GCSEs in English/maths, industry secondments for teachers and a learning loan for adults in another report on skills
- The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) who followed up their proposal for a National Advancement Service for job seekers by making it one of the key proposals in their 2015 Budget submission to the Chancellor
- Ofsted who confirmed that they would publish stats on FE and skills inspections twice rather than four times a year but back it up with monthly management info
- The Headteachers' Roundtable who published a Policy Paper in support of the College of Teaching
- Ofqual who launched consultation on regulatory requirements for new GCSEs in computer science

- The Institute of Education's Peter Blatchford who wrote a **blog** about whether class sizes matter following Ed Miliband's pledge to restrict class sizes for 5, 6, and 7 yr olds
- PSHE and sex education, the subject of two reports this week, one by the Education Committee and the other by Lords Darzi and Layard both in effect calling for better support and guidance for children from an early age
- The Inclusion Trust and the think tank LKMCo who published a report calling for more help and support for children in danger of being excluded from school
- The Spanish parliament who voted to make chess a compulsory subject in Spanish schools following research showing that it helped improve maths and reading levels

Tweet(s) of the week

- *"All politicians should seek psychiatric help says Alistair Campbell."* @Independent
- *"Tiger Mum admits she spent £200 a month on tutors for her son."* @SchoolsImprove
- *"To call oneself an Outstanding Teacher is to misunderstand what it means to be a teacher, the corrosive power of observation culture."* @tombennett71
- *"Have given the spellchecker up for lint."* @chhcalling

Acronym(s) of the Week

- PSHE. Personal, social, health and economic education
- SRE. Sex and relationships education
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Quote(s) of the week

- *"Our plan begins with a revolution in vocational education."* Ed Miliband on Labour's new industrial plan
- *"There is a lack of clarity on the status of the subject."* The Education Committee on PSHE
- *"The government should act as the 'conductor of the orchestra' and play an enabling role, focused on business and education."* The Lords Digital Skills Committee on a pivotal moment for UK digital skills

Number(s) of the week

- 80,000. The number of extra apprenticeships the Labour Party is pledging to create each year
- 16.2%. The unemployment rate for 16-24 year olds
- £8 an hour. What both Conservatives and Labour are pushing for as the minimum wage by 2020
- 1m. The number of people who have signed up to take online university courses or Moocs in the UK since FutureLearn launched the online platform in Sept 2013

What to look out for next week

- Nick Gibb MP on 'The Future of Assessment' at the Reform think tank (Wednesday)

- BIS Committee session on the work of the Dept (Wednesday)
- Labour Party announcement on HE tuition fees? (Friday)