

Policy Eye: (Election 2015)



Highlights of week ending Friday 21 November 2014

(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 in a word

Some familiar themes cropped up this week: the new AS level; vocational education in schools; alternative GCSEs for post-16 English and maths and FE funding; and never far behind, student financing in HE. While the heat rises in other policy areas such as the economy, NHS and immigration in advance of the general election, for education things appear more prosaic, the issues more fundamental. In some cases, such as teacher workloads for which the initial trawl for views closed this week, there's been a deliberate attempt to take some of the heat out of the system; in others, skills funding for example, the full extent may not be known until after the election when the next funding review takes place. All of which means education is a bit betwixt and between at the moment but for many, the issues are real and the debate just as important. The Shadow Education Minister, for instance, kept the heat up on the AS level and alternative maths quals this week, calling the former rather colourfully '*the biggest issue in secondary education*' and the latter, a core component in Labour's thinking for the future. On vocational learning in schools, both the Education Secretary and the Chief Inspector made keynote speeches about the topic this week with the Chief Inspector issuing a number of robust challenges to schools, employers and government to pull together on an issue still seeking a solution. Meanwhile the FE sector wended its way back from this week's Association of Colleges Conference and the previous week's Skills Show with ringing endorsements about the importance of the skills agenda but little certainty about its future funding while for HE, two more reports came out this week highlighting continuing concerns about the sustainability of the current financing system and proposing a range of alternative solutions. It was the Skills Minister who told the Colleges' Conference that you can have all the grand policy plans in the world but if you don't get education right, nothing else much matters. It rather says it all.

Top headlines this week

- 'Immigration is changing character of UK schools, claims Iain Duncan Smith.' (**Monday**)
- 'This half-baked A level reform is being rushed for the election.' (**Tuesday**)
- 'Ofsted chief: stream pupils by ability at age 14.' (**Wednesday**)
- 'Textbook case of sloppy work.' (**Thursday**)
- 'Teacher workload at unacceptable levels.' (**Friday**)

People/organisations in the news this week

- The G20 leaders who concluded their summit in Brisbane at the weekend promising to do more "*to boost growth and create quality jobs*"
- The BIS Dept who launched a response to this summer's consultation on traineeships with a number of recommendations for 2015

- The Skills Minister who confirmed in his address to the Colleges Conference that he had asked the Education and Training Foundation to look into the issue of alternatives to English and maths GCSE
- The Education Secretary who highlighted five major current reforms, from the focus on STEM subjects to apprenticeships, that the government has introduced to help to improve skill levels among young people
- The Education Secretary who launched Anti-Bullying Week with some optimistic stats on how the issue was being tackled
- The Schools Minister who challenged the publishing industry to produce high-quality textbooks and resources to meet the demands of the new curriculum
- The Shadow Education Secretary who returned to the issue of A level reform and called on the Dept to make things clearer
- The HE Commission who published a report arguing that the current HE funding model was unsustainable and listing six possible alternative funding approaches
- The National Union of Students who called on future governments to scrap fee loans in favour of progressive taxation (on the wealthiest and business) in a Manifesto for 2015
- The Association of Colleges who concluded its three day annual conference with a 10 point 2015 Manifesto for an incoming government
- The FE Commissioner whose first annual report highlighted some of the lessons to be learned from the eleven colleges his team had visited over the last year
- The Skills Commission who published the latest in the volume of reports highlighting weaknesses (in this case: four) in our skills system
- Sir Michael Wilshaw who listed four priorities that would help transform vocational education for young people in a speech to employers
- Glenys Stacey, who in a speech this week, spelt out some of the issues surrounding A/AS level reform whether things remain coupled or uncoupled
- The Workload Challenge for teachers which closes today with issues such as marking, data collection, inspection evidence and planning time, amongst the top concerns raised
- Teach First, who are set to spread their Teach for All programmes to Africa
- Tim Oates who investigated the textbook 'industry' both here and abroad and who called for more high-quality textbooks, whether in narrative or digital form, to help raise standards in this country
- Tony Little, the headmaster of Eton, who will become the chief education officer of Gems from next September
- The hockey stick principle, one of ten tips this week on public speaking by academics, pointing to the fact that audiences tend to scan powerpoint slides by skimming in a loop rather than reading top to bottom or left to right

Tweet of the week

- *'Pupils skip after school kickabouts in favour of Facebook.'* @tele_education
- *'The student loan system is not in crisis: we can halve its cost by slowing the income threshold for repayment.'* @xtophercook

Quote(s) of the week

- *"I believe it is vitally important that we offer them (learners without a C grade in English and maths) qualifications that are high quality, consistent, understood by parents and respected by employers."* The Skills Minister on what the government is looking for from alternative qualifications in English and maths
- *"We've never had a better opportunity to tackle our lamentable record on vocational education."* Sir Michael Wilshaw on seizing the opportunity to transform vocational learning
- *"More politicians need to be able to code if they are to legislate effectively on technology."* The founder of the worldwide web on the importance of learning how to code

Number(s) of the week

- 800. The number of measures proposed by the G20 leaders to help push up economic growth an extra 2.1% by 2018
- 50,000. The number of teachers expected to have responded to the Workplace Challenge
- Six. The number of alternative options for HE funding put forward in a report this week by the Higher Education Commission (with no preference indicated these include: keeping things as they are with a few tweaks to rates; a graduate tax; returning to a government grant system; lifting the fee cap; a hybrid version of much of the above; differential fees)
- 15.4%. The latest figure for 16-24 yr old NEETs, down 136,000 over the last quarter

What to look out for next week

- All Party Parliamentary Group report on maths and numeracy learning in early years settings (Tuesday)
- Second Education Committee witness session on 16-19 Apprenticeships and Traineeships (Wednesday)