

Policy Eye: (Election 2015)



Highlights of week ending Friday 20 March 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

Yesterday MPs shook hands with the Speaker and trooped out of the Chamber as the 2010-2015 Parliament drew to a close. Formal dissolution takes place on Monday and both major Parties head off to the campaign trail pretty much neck and neck.

For the moment, much of this week has been given to getting as much sorted and out before purdah begins and restrictions on government activity kick in. In education there's been a barrage of announcements, reports and updates which can be broadly filed under three headings: funding; qualification developments; and future strategy. Here's a summary of each.

Under funding, perhaps the most worrying area at present is that of adult skills training, essential for tooling up the country for economic revival but facing sustained cuts. Provider allocations have perhaps not been as bad as originally feared but as has been remarked before, the quest for a sustainable investment system based on employer and individual contributions, remains a key task for an incoming government. Schools too could face difficult times if, as the IfS predicted in a report this week that '*spending will fall by 7% in real terms*' over the next five years. As for HE where this week 2015/16 allocations were confirmed, uncertainties over the impact of lifting the cap on student numbers and recruitment of overseas student numbers among other things, continue to trouble the sector as HEFCE's latest health check indicated.

On qualification developments, Ofqual has been busy this week updating on progress in the current reform programme but two other areas have also hit the headlines. One is the qualification framework for adult learning, the son or daughter of QCF in other words, which is now out for consultation until 17 June. And the other is Functional Skills, given a thumbs up in another report this week but in need of some support and attention. All three areas will need some attention after the election.

Finally, future strategy and two important but battle weary areas namely 14-19 provision and adult vocational provision, both in the spotlight this week. The former had both the CBI and a think tank calling for further reform and the latter is now the subject of a major new consultation which will complete in the summer and set the direction for the next five years.

The new government won't be short of things to do.

Top headlines this week

- 'Morgan rejects heads' independent curriculum body.' (**Monday**)
- 'Cost of a degree is not worth it, says Oxford bursar.' (**Tuesday**)
- 'Colleges say' swathe of cuts' threatens adult education.' (**Wednesday**)
- 'School budgets facing significant cuts.'" (**Thursday**)
- 'Media studies survive but leisure studies don't in final cull of A' levels. (**Friday**)

People/organisations in the news this week

- The Business Secretary who launched a hefty consultation about the future vision for adult FE as it strives to deliver its dual mandate of skills training for the workplace and second chance opportunities
- The BIS Dept who confirmed that HNs would remain under their current (HE) funding regime but that some of the rules around Advanced Learning Loans would be relaxed
- The Education Secretary who responded to growing enthusiasm for an independent curriculum body by arguing that ministers should retain responsibility for curriculum decisions because they could be held to account
- The DfE who published a discussion paper on Academy chain performance suggesting two measures, one value-added and one improvement-based
- The DfE who published a set of 9 protocols for relieving some of the strain of constant change and reform as it responded to the recent Workload Challenge. (Spoiler alert: major change should only be brought in at the start of the year)
- The DfE who updated its statutory guidance on careers provision
- The HE Power List of top movers and shakers for English HE in 2015 which had George Osborne at No 1, Theresa May at No 2, the Gen Sec of the Chinese Communist Party at No 6 (because of the importance of Chinese students to HE) and Vince Cable at No 10
- James Dyson whose Foundation has donated £12m to Imperial College London to help set up a School of Design Engineering
- Dame Ruth Silver who has been appointed to chair a Scottish Government Commission into access to university
- Sir Paul Nurse who will lead a review into UK research funding especially around science
- Stephen Munday who will chair a new group looking at how to implement the Carter Review recommendations on the quality of initial teacher training
- HEFCE who published agreed funding allocations to universities and colleges for 2015/16 and followed this up with its regular financial health check of the sector
- The BIS Dept who published an evaluation of the FE Commissioner's 'quality' intervention process and found it now recognised and working effectively
- Ofqual who launched a consultation on a new regulated qualifications framework as it prepared for life after the QCF
- Functional Skills, back in the news this week as the review into employer and learner needs was published recommending that they should be seen as genuine alternative, rather than stepping stone, qualifications
- Fact checker the Conversation who examined whether the Coalition really had created over 2m apprenticeships and concluded that while this was factually correct in terms of registered starts, questions remained about exactly what constituted general on the job training and what constituted a genuine apprenticeship
- The government who issued operating guidelines for the proposed new database of post-16 courses, due to be launched this autumn
- The Foundation Code, a set of principles designed to strengthen advice and guidance for young people which was developed by eight leading education bodies and launched this week

- Ofsted who reported on a survey of school leaders' views on inspection and claimed that many found it useful in helping make improvements
- Ofqual who issued further regulatory guidelines this week on a number of 2016 subjects and updated the position on many of the remaining GCSEs, AS and A' levels
- The CBI who called for 'a full review of 14-18 education' to be on the list of things to be done in the first 100 days of an incoming government in May
- The think tank IPPR who published another report on 14-19 education also calling for a review of 14-19 education focusing on its purpose and end product
- The think tank Reform who also published a report on schools in this case arguing that improved performance can come from working in supportive strategic groups
- The Institute of Fiscal Studies who looked at school funding in the light of different Party commitments and suggested that at best cuts of 7% might be expected in the future and at worst 12% depending on pension, pay and NI increases
- What childcare is on offer, something that primary and secondary schools are to be required to provide alongside performance table data

Tweet(s) of the week

- *"Kids think there are 2 job options: what Mum does and what Dad does."* @virginmedia
- *"50 mile school run: the price I'm willing to pay for the best school."* @edon tap
- *"Nick Boles: FE policy has been based on instincts and prejudice."* @FEontap

Acronym(s) of the Week

- CGHE. The new Centre for Global Higher Education, to be led by the UCL Institute of Education with the Universities of Sheffield and Lancaster and providing a focus for research into HE and future directions
- FRQ. Framework of Regulated Qualifications, successor to the QCF

Quote(s) of the week

- *"If I've taken one thing away from my time so far it's the fact that everyone has an opinion on education."* Nicky Morgan on life as Education Secretary
- *"The system of Functional Skills is not broken but could be improved."* The core conclusion from the latest review into Functional Skills
- *"Although the commitments made by the three main UK parties are subtly different, they could all imply real spending per pupil falling by 7% or more between 2014/15 and 2019/20."* The Institute of Fiscal Studies on the cold winds of funding reality
- *"To borrow an analogy: Ofsted becomes the hygiene inspector and peer review provides the restaurant critic."* The NAHT's Russell Hobby on reforming the school inspection system
- *"It's not clear how much capacity the academy chains have to hammer up results even if the early ones were a success."* The BBC's Chris Cook on measuring Academy chain performance

Number(s) of the week

- £3.97bn. How much HEFCE is allocating to universities and colleges for 2015/16 for teaching, research and other funded activity
- 190,000. The number of adult learning places that could go over the next year as a result of cuts according to the Association of Colleges
- 89.7%. The number of young people entering university from state school last year, a new high
- 81%. The percentage of school leaders who, in a survey by Ofsted, reported that inspection helped them improve by identifying strengths and weaknesses
- 33.1%. How much more women can earn if they have two or more A levels in STEM subjects according to commissioned research from the DfE

What to look out for next week

- Parliament is dissolved (Monday)