

Policy Eye: (Election 2015)



Highlights of week ending Friday 30 January 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

Schools and HE have been making the news this week and it's been a very mixed bag.

For schools there have been two issues. One has been about performance and how this should be measured and reported and the other has been about the school system itself and whether changes here, and in particular what's known as 'academisation,' has helped raised standards.

Issues of performance have arisen because this week has seen the annual publication of the school 'league' tables, different this year following the changes to early entry, iGCSEs and to vocational qualification recognition. The net result has seen a number of independent schools at the bottom of the league tables and a doubling of the number of state schools who have fallen below the required floor standard leading in turn to a series of questions about the merits or otherwise of the current system. What started 20 years ago as an exercise in creating the informed consumer has pretty much ended up creating a very confused consumer. As Jon Coles, formerly in charge of such things at the DfE argued in the Independent this week, the problem is that the government is only providing the data it prefers, not that which consumers seek. At present that seems to be coming from alternative sources but it seems likely that the continuing data revolution will lead to further changes in the ways school output is reported.

The second issue facing schools this week has been about the reforms to the school system where two critical reports, one from the Education Committee and the other from the Public Accounts Committee, have raised challenging questions about the diversification of the system and oversight of it. Academies in particular have been under intense scrutiny this week but the wider issue is that the creation of different types of school have changed the operation of the school system in many ways, accountability, funding, governance and so on. It means any incoming government this year will have to think carefully about how the system should operate in the future.

As for HE, two issues have been gathering steam here also this week. One is about alternative providers, part of the government's original White Paper plans for opening out the HE sector and giving students greater choice but remaining controversial as concerns emerge about accountability, funding and quality. Here the government has moved to stem some of the concerns with a series of measures to strengthen requisite quality assurance arrangements.

And the other issue is about tuition fees with Labour apparently poised to announce its policy in this area potentially encompassing a reduction in the maximum fee level to £6000. According to BBC expert Robert Peston, this could come at a great cost, potentially £2.5bn a year based on current loan rates. Not unnaturally the FE sector is keeping a watchful eye for any raid on the skills budget to help pay for this. By all accounts there's no done deal yet but nerves are fraying.

Top headlines this week

- 'Majority of UK's most influential had independent school education-survey' (**Monday**)
- 'No proof academies raise standards, say MPs.' (**Tuesday**)

- 'Ofqual issues four-point improvement plan for functional skills.' (**Wednesday**)
- 'League Tables branded 'a nonsense' by private schools.' (**Thursday**)
- 'Government announces new rules for private colleges.' (**Friday**)

People/organisations in the news this week

- The HE Minister who announced a series of measures including annual re-designation and minimum requirements on registering students intended to beef up quality assurance arrangements for alternative HE providers
- The Education Secretary who underlined the importance of a knowledge-based curriculum in a keynote speech outlining her vision for education which also included a call to rethink the position on practical assessments in GCSE science
- MPs of all Parties, many of whom are lining up to support an early day motion on removing international students from net migration targets
- The think tank Policy Exchange who published a report showing how smarter use of technology and data could help local authorities save up to £10bn over the next 5 years
- Best of Both worlds, the title of a new guide from the CBI and sponsored by Middlesex University, showing how HE and business can work together on skills and innovation
- The Association of Graduate Employers who became the latest organisation to predict a buoyant labour market (vacancies up 11.9%) for graduates in 2015
- UCAS who confirmed that applications to higher education were up, particularly from EU applicants, as it reported on the position following the important Jan 15 deadline
- Local Growth money allocated to LEPs this week to support regional skills, housing and transport initiatives
- The Education and Training Foundation whose recent report on FE leadership and management found declining levels of satisfaction
- The Edge Foundation who published new research in the build-up to this year's VQ Day showing that young people had little idea about which jobs had the best earnings potential
- Apprenticeship and Traineeship figures, both up in the latest official figures for the first quarter of the 2014/15 year including 54,000 apprenticeships starts for 16-19 yr olds and 5,000 traineeship starts
- Ofqual who published its long-awaited report into L2 Functional Skills proposing changes in four key areas including the quality of assessment materials and standard setting
- Ed Sallis, former Chief Exec of Highlands College, who is heading up the review into non-GCSE English and maths which got under way this week
- KS4/KS5 destination figures for the period up to March 2013 showing 91% of KS4 learners in education, employment or training a year after course completion (up 2%) but 71% (a 3% drop) for KS5 learners
- 2016 GCSEs and AS/A' levels where content and assessment arrangements for a further batch of 2016 starts were confirmed by the DfE and Ofqual respectively
- School and College league tables for 2014 performance which were published this week to mixed reactions as the impact of some of the government's changed rules became apparent
- ASCL, NAHT, PiXL and United Learning who published alternative performance tables offering a more 'rounded' picture of school/learner performance

- The Education Committee who published an important report on the government's programme of Academies and Free Schools but could find no conclusive evidence so far that they had raised standards or closed the gap
- Academies, in the news in other respects this week with the Public Accounts Committee asking questions of the head of the Durand Trust and the Gizzi Review reporting no irregularities in the Norfolk Academies inspection issue
- School oversight, debated by MPs this week and the subject of a critical report from the Public Accounts Committee
- Sir Anthony Seldon who used his Oxford lecture to express concerns about the failure of the major parties to come up with any convincing strategies to tackle social mobility
- Heavy workloads, cited by $\frac{3}{4}$ teachers in a recent survey as the top reason why they're quitting teaching with 'wanting to make a difference for young people' as the main reason why they started teaching in the first place
- Music and arts activities for children, especially the music education hubs where funding will be stretched into a further year under an announcement from the DfE this week
- Victoria Beer, Chair of the Teaching Schools Council, who was announced as Chair of the panel who will judge the 2015 DfE Character Awards next month
- Teachers, shop assistants and hospitality staff who were among the unhappiest workers in a recent survey looking at pay rates
- 'Associate dean of eureka moments,' a new post being advertised at Bristol University

Tweet(s) of the week

- *'Private schools happy to be at bottom of league tables; not sulking just don't care.'* @Telegraph
- *Countries with better maths scores allocate resources more equitably. It's not how much you spend but how you spend it.'* @OECD

Acronym(s) of the Week

- SFR. (Statistical First Release,) the Dept's official statistical publications showing data, such as the destination data this week, collected on schools, children and young people

Quote(s) of the week

- *"It's still too early to know how much the academies programme has helped raise standards."* The Chair of the Education Committee summarises the findings in his Committee's report on Academies and Free Schools
- *"I am concerned that a decision to remove practical assessment from science qualifications is in danger of holding back the next generation of scientists."* The Education secretary steps into the debate about the assessment of science practicals
- *"With this review we are working to establish what kind of improvements might be needed to make sure non-GCSE English and maths qualifications have labour market respect."* The Chair of the review of non-GCSE English and maths which got under way this week

Number(s) of the week

- 330. The number of state secondary schools who have fallen below the floor standard (of 40% of pupils gaining 5 A*- Cs including Eng/maths) in the latest 'league' tables and which has doubled since last year as new rules have applied
- 2%. The increase in applications to higher education against the same stage last year
- 32.2. The average number of hours we work a week according to latest data, up slightly
- 40%. The number of people who went to independent school in Debrett's latest survey of the top influential people in the UK

What to look out for next week

- HE Minister Greg Clark speaks at the HEFCE Annual Conference (Wednesday)
- Opposition-led debate on Apprenticeships (Wednesday)