

2014/43

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Pocket Watch – Postscript to summer 2014: what we've learned, what we have to look forward to

Introduction

MPs are back next week, schools and colleges too, time therefore to take stock of what happened in the world of education over the summer and to consider what lies ahead.

Summer 2014: what we've learned

- **What have we learned from this year's exam results?** This year's build-up was characterised by dire warnings about the impact of the 'Gove' reforms of less coursework, more terminal assessment and so on. Ofqual talked cautiously of "*more variability*," the media more openly of '*turbulence*.' In the event while concerns remain about the impact on some school performance, few of the more dramatic fears were realised and there was more commentary about stability than anything else. "*Overall results this summer are very stable*" declared Ofqual in its review of the AS and A level results while the Joint Council suggested that any increased "*volatility*" at GCSE would be contingent on how far individual schools had had to change their existing exam approaches to deal with change

There were, however, some specific points to emerge from this year's exam results. For A level, these included: a continuing increase in entries for STEM subjects, up over 20% in further maths over the last four years for instance, coupled with a continuing shift towards more traditional/facilitating subjects; continuing questions about the long-term operation of the HE market highlighted this year by the use of trading up (better than expected results) along with the extra 30,000 places available; the lack of any change in performance patterns between boys and girls despite a shift towards a supposedly more male favoured system of linear exams; and further evidence of the fraught debate surrounding the future of the de-coupled AS (Labour announced a policy to recouple the AS on the same day as the results were released.) For GCSE, where there was a noticeable drop (39%) in early entries following last autumn's policy change and where the impact of the Gove changes is still under debate, the big issue has been the drop in English grades, down 1.9 percentage points at A*-C although there was a slight increase in top grades with the finger pointing at the changes in assessment requirements. On other issues, entries for single sciences fell, down 18.6% in Biology for instance, raising questions about the cumulative burden of assessment, foreign language entries apart from Spanish continued to fall while computing was the fastest growing subject

- **Young people.** The summer results season often concentrates minds on the needs of young people particularly those not following traditional routes and this summer was no different with a number of reports published. The Prince's Trust highlighted the importance of skills training for young people at a time when over 30% of businesses were reporting skill shortages at entry level while the CBI and think tank IPPR both focused on the importance of work preparation and the development of employability skills for young people. The CBI's call for a reinstatement of work-related learning at key stage 4 and for a national system of work experience local brokers was particularly eye catching at a time when youth transition is again becoming an important political as well as social issue
- **Qualification development.** A number of consultations were released over the summer including those on regulatory arrangements, 2016 qualifications and the QCF. Ofqual's latest Corporate Plan which was released in mid-August and which sets out a programme of work over the next three years is a helpful guide to what lies ahead. It lists a lot of activities for 2014/15 admittedly mainly for traditional subjects but also confirms publication this autumn of its functional skills report, consultation during the year on proposals to change the focus of National Assessment standards and a commitment to commission the national reference test for GCSE English and maths also at some point during the year ahead. The only area left somewhat uncovered was apprenticeships

- **Inspection arrangements.** Ofsted is intending to consult this autumn on longer-term changes to inspection arrangements but as it confirmed in July it's also making some changes for 2014/15. For schools this includes: separate graded judgements for sixth form provision, a focus on curriculum balance and the role of governors particularly following the Trojan Horse affair and the dropping of the requirement on evidence forms of a grade for the quality of teaching for individual lesson observations. For FE, colleges requiring improvement will be given more time (re-inspection will be within 12-24 rather than 12-18 months,) an additional question on the use of learning technology will be added to the Learner View section and safeguarding will be given a written judgment
- **Performance measures.** Three things to note here. First in July the DfE published its plans for the 2014 school tables indicating limited change for this year but confirming wider change will follow in light of the earlier consultations on primary and secondary performance measures. Second in August a group of head teachers and professionals announced that this autumn they would publish an alternative set of tables and third, BIS has published an important consultation on the four outcome measures (destinations, progression, earnings, achievement) it intends to use for 19+ learning from 2016/17
- **Party policy.** Labour has been noticeably active over the summer following up its July announcements about the potential local commissioning of some 19-24 funding and proposals to create a tech degree route, with two further significant developments. First in a keynote speech in August, Shadow Education Minister Tristram Hunt pulled together the emerging elements of Labour's 5-19 education policy including: no more Free Schools; Directors of School Standards; Ofsted inspection of academy chains; fully qualified profession; Nat Bacc framework; revived careers guidance; and FE Institutes of Tech Ed, to name a few. As for higher education, Liam Byrne's recent pamphlet for the Social Market Foundation has outlined some thinking here particularly on the development of a higher-level voc route with institutions and learning programmes to match. As for the government it is busy implementing its established programme of reforms and in the words of Nicky Morgan, taking '*meaningful action*' to ensure opportunity for all

Autumn 2014: (some of) what to expect

- September
 - Implementation of initial National Curriculum changes
 - Ofsted survey report into 16-19 programmes of study
 - National Careers Council Report to government
 - Progress Report from the Commission for Adult Teaching and Learning
 - Closure of expressions of interest in National Colleges
- October
 - Closure of consultation on 19+ outcome success measures
- November
 - Government response to changes for FE loans and HNs
- December
 - Chancellor's Autumn Statement
 - Launch of new Science and innovation Strategy
- Autumn sometime
 - Launch of Ofsted consultation on future inspection arrangements
 - Publication of Ofqual report into functional skills



Steve Besley

Head of Policy (UK and International)

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