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Pocket Watch – Summer Headlines

Introduction

For those that missed them, whether by design or not, here's a quick reminder of some of the main education stories from over the summer hols, August in particular.

The main story over the summer

Given that August by tradition is results month, the main story/ies inevitably concerned exam and assessment results in some form. The month began with stories of Ministerial concern about aspects of the exam board system and ended with the same Ministers heralding a stable set of GCSE and A' level results and an upbeat set of KS2 results. In between many familiar arguments about the exam system in general and specific trends in subjects, regions and so on were aired but perhaps the most notable feature, picked up in some of the headlines, was the emerging impact of government policies. 'Gove's generation' as an Institute of Ed blog labelled this year's entrants faced a number of changes instigated by the previous Education Secretary including those to early entry, resits and assessment, much of which showed in changing trends such as the drop in entries by 15 year olds and rise in entries for EBacc subjects for 16 yr olds and English/maths GCSE resits for 17 yr olds. More of course is to come as new GCSEs and decoupled AS levels come in over the next few years. Maths had another bumper entry year at both GCSE and A' level, languages remain a concern but this year's big noise is Computing with a surge in entries at both GCSE and A' level. Finally, one unusual fact from the BBC's Education correspondent, Sean Coughlan: *"there will be more people starting university this autumn than were getting five good GCSEs a couple of decades ago."*

The biggest debate over the summer

Arguably there've been two, both familiar.

First the long-term future of the GCSE exam. The GCSE has faced criticism for much of its 27 years, indeed the chief executive of Ofqual was said to have expressed amazement at the extent of this when she took over a few years back, and it faced a further barrage again this summer: *'out of date,' 'ready to wither on the vine'* and *'killing our young people;'* just a selection of comments from the boss of the CBI, a former Education Secretary and former headmaster respectively. The case against is threefold: they're archaic, they expensive both in terms of time and cost and they don't prepare kids very well for the future. In defence, as Tim Oates argued, most countries have, if not exams at age 16 certainly *"high-stakes assessment,"* they help ensure a qualitative bar of achievement for future progression and they provide a focal point for learning. There the argument rests, perhaps for another year with issues like Sir Mike Tomlinson's Core + model for exams at age 16 still hanging in the air.

The other debate this summer has been about the numbers going to university, up 3% to 47% at the last count with the student numbers cap lifted this year. Should we continue to encourage more people to go to university or should we be encouraging more to follow a skilled or professional pathway, what's best for the individual, what's best for the country? As HEFCE and others have argued, few would doubt the benefits that higher ed can bring and certainly the graduate premium, the return on investment, remains high but as both the Edge Foundation and the CIPD have argued in reports this summer, there are concerns that a rise in graduate numbers has not been reflected in a rise in high skilled jobs and productivity. At root, as Professor Alison Wolf argued recently is the question of whether university should be seen as a route to a job or as a wider learning and development experience ...or both?

The most worrying story

Inevitably about funding and again there've been two.

First the Sixth Form Colleges Association who published their annual funding impact survey on the eve of A' level results day showing that a lot of Colleges were having to drop courses because of funding cuts and as far as they could see, things were only going to get worse. 72 of the 93 Colleges responded and of those, 26 feared for their very future. Increases in pension and NI contributions, the imposition of the VAT burden and the imminent ending of formula protection funding all suggest that the Association is not crying wolf. There's considerable sympathy for their position as the recent IPPR Spending Review Paper indicates but the government seems intent on using the area-based reviews, which may or may not prove any more favourable, to help resolve the situation.

Second, the Skills Funding Agency's announcement at around the same time that they will have to clampdown on further qualification approvals for the remainder of the financial year for all bar a couple of categories of qualification: automatic approvals and those that qualify for 24+ Advanced Learning Loans. This is seen as a temporary measure and as the government regularly reminds us, there are a lot of qualifications on the stocks but it's a sharp reminder of how tight things are at present.

The most significant speech of the summer

It was more of an article than a speech but David Cameron's comment piece as his government reached its first 100 days watermark on 15 August was significant for three reasons. First, it re-emphasised the message that however small its majority, the government intends to keep up the pace: *"we will not waste a second in getting on with the job."* Things may be different once a new Labour leader is selected on 12 Sept but for the moment, it's all go. Second, as if we needed reminding, the economy remains the b-all and end-all. And third, perhaps surprisingly, education remains a high priority with the Prime Minister for instance pushing the case for Academies and Free Schools.

The most important policy paper of the summer

Any number stand out here including the Sutton Trust's report on pay differentials for privately educated graduates, Cambridge assessment's research into the difficulties in making exam predictions, QAA's response to the Quality Assessment Review, the Children's Society Good Children's Report and Policy Exchange's Paper on a levy on schools for GCSE English and maths resits in FE. But given the government's priority being attached to them, the levy consultation and accompanying announcements about apprenticeships is perhaps the most important in terms of future policy impact. The downside is that the consultation raises more questions than answers about for instance which employers would fall in scope or not, about whether there should be a limit to how much an employer's account could be topped up and how long they should have to use it and whether it will enable quality training or quick and dirty. The levy as Julian Gravatt at the AoC said is *"just a tool to encourage training, investment and a focus on skills"* but it could be a very important one and it's one that needs to be got right.

The most noticeable survey of the summer

Again there've been a number over the summer including the annual National Student Satisfaction Survey, The Motor Industry Institute survey let alone the Sixth Form Colleges and CIPD Labour Market surveys already mentioned but the one whose results may run for some time is the ASCL (Association of School and College Leaders) survey about the EBacc. The government intends that pupils starting secondary school this year will work towards the EBacc subjects at GCSE; critics feel this is prescriptive, not suitable for all pupils and want more flexibility over how it's applied. In their survey, ASCL found that as many as 87% of respondents opposed the requirement in its current form. We may not have heard the last.



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