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Pocket Watch – 10 headline announcements for the FE sector

Introduction

"We've not been dealt an easy hand of plenty," the Skills Minister conceded when he came to address the gathering of the FE world at the annual AoC Conference for the first time this week, though announcing more money for English and maths and for the college estate clearly helped

Arguably three messages stood out from this year's Conference. One was localism, always an attractive rallying call and given added impetus recently with changes to the skills system, the Innovation Code and the Heseltine Report but still facing the question of how best to activate at a local level: should it be through LEPs as Heseltine argued, should providers take the lead, should there be some other local machinery, it's still not clear. Another was funding, inevitable perhaps given the changes going on for 16-19 and adult skills funding but now facing the wider questions of where investment should come from: state, community, employer, individual, and what returns on employment and even wages should be expected. And a third was learning. Yes, level 2 English and maths is vital but as the Lingfield Review pointed out, FE is more than a supplier of remedial training, it is a sector that can help drive the economy by providing employability, enterprise and high level technician skills. Such issues set the context for some of this year's important announcements

Ten headline announcements

1. Apprenticeships. Continuing emphasis on quality and meeting employer needs, work going on to enable more SME engagement as Holt had recommended, the Richard Review due before Christmas
2. Traineeships. Under development, aimed at those not yet ready for an apprenticeship and to include a mix of English and maths, work preparation and work experience
3. Earn and learn. Heavily trailed and being worked on at present, typically for 18-21 year olds who fall outside the raised participation age but who as yet have no formal learning or training package. Announcement due in the New Year but some (internal) tensions about the role of benefits
4. 16-19 vocational qualifications. Consultation to be issued shortly following on from changes at 14-16 to identify high value qualifications that can be used, potentially from 2014 onwards, for post-16 performance measures
5. English and maths including functional skills. A doubling of resources to be made available but as yet unclear from where this is coming
6. The Guild. A new team now in place to develop the concept, pretty frenetic timescale with consultation in Jan 2013, implementation plan March 2013, initial operation August 2013
7. Chartered status. Consultation launched on the criteria to be used and for a design concept logo; closing date Jan 16 2013
8. Inspections. Common standards to be applied across all post-16 providers and continuing emphasis on monitoring provider responsiveness to the market
9. Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning. Emerging themes to be published in December, final Report due March 2013
10. Funding. 16-19 shadow allocations out, final 16-19 and SFA allocations now awaiting the Chancellor's Financial Statement on December 5



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