

Pocket Watch: FE reform programme moves up a gear

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“Our focus is on putting in place a rigorous and responsive system largely through the existing architecture”

Introduction

Carrot or stick? There's an element of both in the latest **announcements** for FE launched this week as part of yet another skills plan. Carrot in the sense that additional money has been announced for the sector although this is largely capital rather than resource funding and much of it was announced in the Autumn Statement. Stick, in the sense that the Government is ratcheting up the FE reform programme to ensure that any extra investment is accompanied by improved performance. On the plus side, this is the Minister ensuring he can go to the Treasury during the Spending Round armed with a high-performing system; on the debit side, this is the Government picking up concerns from Ofsted and employers about performance and responsiveness and reacting accordingly. Carrot or stick, bit of both perhaps

Reform context

These latest announcements come as the Government seeks to move the skills reform programme up a gear. A continuing flat lining economy and a series of critical Reports from Ofsted, the most recent last month on responsiveness, have encouraged the Government to press down harder on the pedal. So out goes 'New Challenges, New Chances,' in comes 'Rigour and Responsiveness,' two little words that are rapidly becoming the watchwords for the reform of the skills system. Not only are they being applied as the key criteria for reform of the apprenticeship system as well as 16-19 qualifications, they appear now as the title of this latest skills plan

Headline messages

The six measures announced are all pretty familiar and build on the previous reform programme with its emphasis on funding reform, teaching and learning and apprenticeship development. There are, however, some noticeable differences. First is the introduction of a new sharper intervention process for providers judged inadequate by Ofsted. Under this, training providers could have their contracts terminated while colleges could be put under 'Administered' status, in effect put under the control of an FE Commissioner who, acting on behalf of Government, would instigate a review and restructuring programme. Turnaround time is 12 months. Second is continued 'rationalisation' of the qualification system through the Wolf and Richard principles, the 16-19 consultation, the SFA review of low-take up qualifications and the recently announced Whitehead Review of adult vocational qualifications. Third is further ceding of ownership of parts of the skills system to employers building on the Employer Ownership Pilots and Richard and Heseltine Reviews. Fourth is the opening up of further data on system and individual qualification value through the use of a new score card, more customer information and further earnings and destination data

The 6 identified reform areas

1. **Raising standards** through a new professionalism, a more robust intervention regime and more empowered customers
2. **Reforming apprenticeships** by supporting the model of employer ownership set out in the response to the Richard Review
3. **Introducing Traineeships** by creating new programmes set within a defined framework of skills and learning
4. **Reforming qualifications** by simplifying the qualification system and focusing on qualifications that can offer added value and progression potential
5. **Simplifying the funding system** to support responsiveness, local needs and quality provision
6. **Better information and data** through new market intelligence, a monthly scorecard and improved course information

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