

Policy Eye: (Post-Election 2015)

Highlights of week ending Friday 14 August 2015



(Welcome to Policy Eye, a nearly weekly service from Policy Watch offering a regular round up of UK education headlines and stories from over the previous 7 days and currently keeping a special 'eye' on developments following the 2015 election.)

The week summed up

Results week of course for advanced level students and as one sixth former tweeted at the start of the week: "you can almost smell the apprehension."

For those seeking just the cut down version, Thursday's headline below taken from the BBC website ('*top grades down but more university places*,') pretty much nails it but there is of course much more to it than that. Commentary, analysis and reflection continues to pour in and will continue to do so until appeals and performance data is complete and UCAS issues its final report at the end of the year, but for the moment perhaps, four themes stand out.

First the results themselves which have stayed pretty stable this year with a slim (0.1%) rise in the overall pass rate and the number (8.2%) getting the very top grade also remaining stable but where the rise in entries for the so-called core subjects has continued. Maths, computing, geography and even Spanish were all noticeably up. There may be three reasons for this. First, these are the 'facilitating' subjects that help secure a place at top universities; second students may have reacted to government messages in the Productivity Plan and elsewhere but third, budgetary pressures may well have put the squeeze on other subjects. Either way it's allowed the government to add further weight to the EBacc effect which gains new momentum next month as the incoming Year 7s are put on the EBacc diet.

Second, the anticipated surge in university entry appears under way with 409,000 students already having secured places (up 3% on last year) and Clearing, Adjustment and all sorts of helplines at full throttle. Universities of course have a free rein on numbers this year and it seems also from surveys that fewer young people will defer entry this year perhaps due to changes to maintenance grants and potentially fees but once again its raised the question of whether we need a post-qualification application system to help ease the summer scramble for places.

Third, it's not all about uni, interest in alternative routes remains high. The vocational route through BTECs has remained prominent for some time and as colleges, the SFA and the CBI have all been stressing, apprenticeships offer a valued alternative as well. **PwC's** figures on applications for its Higher Apprenticeships (up 17%) are a case in point. Also this week, **Edge Foundation** and **HR Magazine** have both published pieces highlighting careers where degrees aren't necessary.

Fourth, with 16-19 provision unprotected from cuts and Sixth Form Colleges painting a dire picture of future prospects, it's perhaps no surprise that the results this year are tinged with warnings that providers will find it difficult to generate the same offer let alone the same level of results in future.

Top headlines this week

- 'Increase in university students working to fund studies.' (**Monday**)
- 'Schools Minister: 'vague' qualifications will be thing of past.' (**Tuesday**)
- 'Children ditching books for phones.' (**Wednesday**)

- 'A levels: top grades down but more university places.' (**Thursday**)
- 'Class of 2015 has fallen victim to education cuts, say head teachers.' (**Friday**)

People/organisations in the news this week

- Schools Minister Nick Gibb who claimed that the current A level students were '*the best in a generation*,' and that while the government's latest reforms to exams had helped restore credibility, further reform of the **exam board** system may be needed
- Professor Chris Husbands whose latest **blog** examined the merits and demerits of exam board system reform
- **Ofqual, UCAS** and the **BBC**, each of whom has useful summaries of the A level results and university applications
- The 2015 **WorldSkills event** which has been running this week in Sao Paulo and which has seen over 60 nations, including the UK, compete in what has been described as '*the biggest vocational education and skills excellence event in the world*'
- Labour leadership candidate Jeremy Corbyn who pledged, if elected, to re-create a version of the old **Ministry of Labour** to help train and support the workforce of the future
- Michelle Mone OBE who has been appointed to head a government review to report next year, on supporting **business start-ups in disadvantaged communities**
- Sir Nigel Thrift, Vice-Chancellor at Warwick University, whose **blog** in the build-up to A level results day stressed that alongside any string of exam results, young people should develop wider skills and aptitudes
- Toni Pearce, outgoing President of the NUS, who is joining **NIACE** as its new Head of Employment and Skills with a particular brief on supporting apprenticeships
- **Ed Sheeran**, who left school at 16 but who is now being honoured by his local university in Suffolk with an honorary doctorate
- The QAA who set out an alternative approach to **quality assurance in HE** that would be brisk-based, focused on students' academic experience and built around quality profiling and peer to peer annual dialogue, as it issued its response to HEFCE's current QA review
- **The University of Law** who have promised that from this Sept, graduates who don't secure a job in the legal or commerce sectors within 9 months of graduating, would be entitled to a refund of up to half their tuition fee
- Carlos Vargas-Silva, Associate Professor at Oxford University, who wrote a comment piece in **The Conversation** about foreign students staying in the UK and some of the data used to measure this
- The latest annual **National Student Survey** of final year undergraduates in UK universities which reported a continuing satisfaction rating of 86% overall
- The CIPD (Chartered institute of Personnel and Development) whose latest employer **survey** suggested that what it called '*the long dark decade for young job hunters*' was ending as more employers looked to recruit young people
- The Edge Foundation who published a **report** arguing that some of the occupational classifications used in surveys were not graduate jobs and that many professional jobs did not actually require a degree
- The CBI who highlighted a number of issues around the **apprenticeship levy** as it set out its initial thoughts in a discussion document

- 'They're only for people with bad grades,' 'they're only for young people,' 'I won't get a good qualification;' three of the **Top Ten Apprenticeship Myth-Busters** published by Barclays as it sought to remind young people of the availability of the apprenticeship option
- The Skills Funding Agency who announced a **clampdown** on further qualification approvals except in exceptional cases, for the remainder of the 2015/16 financial year
- The Sixth Form Colleges Association whose latest **annual funding impact survey** painted a pretty sobering picture of belt tightening in that sector
- The NAHT, ATL, NUT and Unison who have joined forces to set out their **concerns** about the current Education and Adoption Bill
- Ofqual who looked at issues around **variability in A level results** for institutions and published the results in a series of charts
- VoiceED who published an **infographic** on why teachers change exam boards
- Chinese style teaching, the subject of a documentary on **BBC2** recently and likely to be extended for some **primary maths classes** in the coming year
- '*10 things secondary teachers need to know about the new primary maths curriculum.*' The latest in a series of useful summary pieces on the **TES website** highlighting recent curriculum changes
- Year 7. Apparently the **most expensive school year** for parents who often have to shell out for new equipment, uniform and other resources which can amount to as much as £6.000+
- British parents who emerged as some of the most anxious and restrictive in Europe when it came to allowing their offspring to play outside or go out alone after dark, in a study published by the **Policy Studies Institute**

Tweet(s) of the week

- "Electing a UN secretary-general takes three months and candidates for Bake Off wait four weeks, so why does applying to university take nearly a year? **@tes**
- "Schools Minister: vague qualifications will be thing of past." **@SchoolsImprove**
- "Over 60% of the people who checked their @CCEA_info GCE results this morning used a smartphone or tablet" **@CCEA**
- "If your A level results aren't great, be cheered by the fact that I got a C and two Us. And I'm currently sitting in a villa in St Tropez." **@Jeremy Clarkson**
- "Parents sign petition and threaten withdrawals after introduction of homework." **@MailOnline**
- "16-19 education in danger of being turned into Cinderella service." **@ascl**

Quote(s) of the week

- "These results provide the clearest proof that the introduction of the EBacc and our drive to persuade more pupils to study core academic subjects has been a success." The Schools Minister hails the increase in entries for core subjects at A level this year
- "While pupils sit in halls and write answers in booklets, almost everything that happens from there on has been revolutionised by technology." The Guardian observes the exam marking process at first hand

- "My concern is in five or ten years' time young men will be the new disadvantaged group. I remain astounded that there is not more political and societal focus on this." UCAS chief executive Mary Curnock Cook on the news that girls continue to apply to university in much greater number than boys
- "Three-quarters will be paying off their loans in their '50s." Will Hutton in a comment piece on the challenges facing many of today's university students
- "We're working on the assumption that the rate will be around 0.5% of payroll." The CBI on its working assumption for the apprenticeship levy
- "The sector cannot survive on starvation rations." The Sixth Form Colleges Association sums up the bleak prospects facing many Sixth Form Colleges
- "I should add that we are not intending for this to be a big consumer brand with related products." Google boss Larry Page on its rebranding as Alphabet

Number(s) of the week

- £412. How much uni students earn on average a month according to recent **research** from insurers Endsleigh, as record numbers (77%) are reported to be turning to part-time work to help pay for their uni courses
- 7%. How few students are planning to defer their university entry and take a gap year this year according to **research** published by Bucks New University
- 98.1%. The overall pass rate (A-E) at A level this year, up slightly (0.1%) on last year
- 29.1%. The rise in entries for A level Computing this year, the biggest increase for any A level subject
- 30%. The number of A level students who reckon their parents get more stressed than they do about Results Day according to recent **research** by the Student Room and Bradford University
- 33%. The number of employers with hard to fill vacancies looking to recruit young people in the coming months according to the CIPD's latest quarterly **survey**
- 26. The number of Sixth Form Colleges who fear they might be out of business by the end of the decade according to the Association's latest funding survey
- 16,430. The number of parents prosecuted in 2014 (up 25% on 2013) for failing to ensure their children attended school

What to look out for next week

- MPs on summer recess
- GCSE Results Day (Thursday)