

Policy Eye: (Election 2015)



Highlights of week ending Friday 16 January 2015

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

The week summed up

The start of the week saw David Cameron set out six themes likely to feature in the Conservative Party Election Manifesto; they included education but surprisingly for some, not the NHS which has shot to the top of voters' concerns this week. The themes contained a lot of references to the economy with mentions of jobs, taxes and tackling the deficit and the argument is that by only getting the economy right will we be able to provide for a strong NHS. It was a message the Chancellor was keen to get across in his Royal Economic Society lecture this week which both set a new positive tone (for Britain to become the most prosperous of any major economy by the 2030s) but also a further challenge to raise education and skill standards.

The Chancellor, indeed the government as a whole, have been making the case for some time about the importance of the education system in nurturing the skills and talent needed to help the economy recover and there have been some interesting developments in this area this week with reports from the Engineering Council UK, McDonalds and the Prince's Trust. All stressed the importance of equipping young people with the right, for which read market-driven, skills.

Elsewhere a positive report on the top end of the graduate market was published, reforms to apprenticeship funding were put on hold for further review and two important deadlines reached. The first, the closing date for applications for school places for autumn 2015, provoked a storm of alarming headlines about the squeeze on school places in parts of the country while the second, the date for submission of UCAS forms for university entry this autumn came with a surge of advice and guidance from UCAS and others guarding applicants against filling in forms with this sort of error highlighted in The Daily Telegraph: *"Thanks for considering my application and I hope I will here (sic) from you soon."*

Top headlines this week

- 'Ofsted school inspections: concerns about reliability.' (**Monday**)
- 'Almost one in five primary schools has too many pupils, Labour survey finds.' (**Tuesday**)
- 'Campaign puts £88bn value on soft skills.' (**Wednesday**)
- 'Global firms urged to invest in education.' (**Thursday**)
- 'A level reform; schools plan to ignore changes by offering AS levels.' (**Friday**)

People/organisations in the news this week

- The Chancellor who proposed a new fiscal rule in his Royal Economic Society Lecture that when conditions were right, future governments should be forced to run a budget surplus
- Global companies who have been urged to follow the lead of Santander, GlaxoSmithKline and HSBC and commit a fifth of their CSR budgets to education by 2020

- MPs who debated grammar school funding this week
- The DfE who published the latest list of Free Schools either open (256 listed) or about to (111 listed)
- The BIS Dept who published a detailed evidence review of how high-performing countries go about improving their basic skills
- The Skills Minister who defended the need to go back to the drawing board on apprenticeship funding in a witness session at the Education Committee
- The Institute for Fiscal Studies who launched their election 2015 website dedicated to assessing the veracity of spending and other economic claims including those on education
- The HE sector who expressed concerns about its proposed role in countering extremism as the Counter-Terrorism and Security Bill reached its Second Reading
- The HE Statistics Agency whose latest figures point to an increase in the number of students achieving top grades but a drop in the number of students studying part-time especially for foundation degrees
- HEFCE who published some good practice case studies where institutions have spelt out clearly to students about how fee and other money is being spent
- 10 University Vice-Chancellors who shared their wish lists for 2015 with calls for more funding, research, foreign students and science all featuring prominently
- The Quality Assessment Review Group, set up to look at future quality assessment arrangements in HE, who called for views on initial principles
- High flying graduates, especially in finance, the public services, accountancy, retail and the armed services, whose job prospects this year look promising although it helps to have undertaken work experience in the industry first
- Communication and interpersonal skills, teamwork, time and self-management skills, decision-making and initiative-taking, taking responsibility: the five 'soft skill areas' identified by McDonalds in the latest campaign launched to promote such skills
- Engineering UK whose latest report forecast 257,000 vacancies in the sector by 2022
- The NUS who joined the clamour for a free bus pass for college students (the Lib-Dems are likely to include discounted bus passes in their election manifesto)
- The Prince's Trust whose latest Youth Index survey found young people slightly less happy than last year and worried about money, jobs and health
- Youth Employment UK who became the latest organisation to launch a critical survey of careers provision in this country
- Ofsted who revealed that to test out the reliability of new short inspections, some schools might experience two separate inspections on the same day
- UCAS chief executive Mary Curnock Cook who reported on a recent survey that suggested many schools will continue to offer the AS level
- 50 13 year olds who will be taught English, maths and science for half a term in a BBC2 documentary series designed to test out the virtues of the Shanghai education system
- Parents who had to submit applications for 2015 primary school places this week as concerns were voiced about demand for places in some areas
- *'What are the most enjoyable and the least enjoyable aspects of the role?'* One of ten recommended questions to ask in a job interview according to a Guardian blog
- And in the week before BETT, apparently researchers have found that by analysing 'likes,' Facebook can know you better than your own family does

Tweet(s) of the week

- *'Computing teachers fear students know more than they do, poll shows.'* @ed_ontap
- *'Majority of voters think international students should be allowed to remain in the UK after graduation and work.'* @UniversitiesUK
- *'Children need to learn how to beat boredom. Nicky Morgan.'* @ed_ontap

Acronym(s) of the Week

- CAS. Computing at School
- CSR. Corporate Social Responsibility

Quote(s) of the week

- *"There is a moment of magic when you see a young person make something totally unique happen on a screen...but to get to that moment we need passionate people who have the right skills and knowledge to help give young people the building blocks they need."* The CEO of Microsoft UK on the importance of trained computer teachers
- *"It is also estimated that almost a quarter of responses were part of several campaigns associated with the consultation."* The BIS Dept reflects on responses to its apprenticeship funding consultation
- *"The phasing out of grammar schools in most of the country was one of the greatest policy disasters of the post-war era."* Sir Edward Leigh MP opens the MPs' debate on the funding of grammar schools

Number(s) of the week

- 6. The number of themes likely to form the core of the Conservative's general election manifesto and covering: dealing with the deficit; creating jobs; lowering taxes; improving education; tackling housing shortages; and helping the retired
- 205 and 51%. The number of graduates who achieved a 1st and 2.1 degree respectively in 2014 according to the latest figures
- 900,000. The number of extra school places reported to be needed over the next decade
- 26 minutes, 28 seconds. What the average lunch hour has been reduced to apparently

What to look out for next week

- Oral Questions to the Education Secretary (Monday)
- Publication of DfE Annual Report and Accounts for 2013/14. (Tuesday)
- Launch of CentreForum/Pearson Report on Primary School Accountability (Wednesday)
- BETT Conference (Wednesday-Saturday)