

Policy Eye: (Election 2015)



Highlights of week ending Friday 27 February 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

Labour's proposed plans to cut tuition fees, described as "*tortuous*" by the Party's Business Secretary, "*implausible*" by some vice-chancellors and "*foolish*" by Vince Cable obviously provides the breaking news this week but is not the only funding story in town at present. The adult skills sector has been badly hit by a further slice of cuts confirmed in the Dept's letter to the Skills Funding Agency this week and the sector is pretty miffed that no-one is highlighting their problems so let's start there.

Basically the sector is facing a cut of 11% on the adult skills budget for 2015/16. And, and it's a big 'and,' this comes after a sustained period of cuts to the adult skills training budgets as government has sought to shift the cost burden from the state to employers and individual learners, as increases in pension and insurance contributions come in and as the impact of protecting programmes like apprenticeships and English and maths could leave some providers facing cuts of up to 24%. All this too at a time when the economy is picking up and employers are gagging for trained staff. Yes, the BIS Dept has no doubt had to fend off even sharper demands and yes apprenticeship funding is up, according to the government potentially up to £800m, but the effects of the reduction on adult skills training could potentially be damaging. Individual provider budgets will be confirmed in the next few weeks but perhaps the final word for the moment at least should rest with the Association of Colleges: "*adult further education is in year 10 of a 15-year cuts programme and could be entirely privately funded by 2020; at this point one third of the UK workforce will be over the age of 50.*"

Back to HE and tuition fees where at the time of writing Ed Miliband has yet to confirm the details but where the Party seems set to announce a cut in the annual tuition fee to £6000. At present commentators are lining up to highlight both concerns and comments; here's a list of six which pretty much capture the current state of the argument.

First, will it help the lower earners; the Institute of Fiscal Studies reckons no because the higher earners will have less to pay off and be able to do it quicker. Second, how will universities make up the shortfall of a lower fee, calculated by some vice-chancellors as up to £10bn over the next five years? Third, what about those already in the system, will they be stuck with the higher fee level? Fourth, what impact will this have on Labour itself; Times correspondent Philip Collins has labelled it more about headlines than helping the poor. Five, why as Nick Pearce of IPPR argued has there been no proper debate about subsidies, maintenance loans and digital provision such as there's been in the USA? And sixth is it fair? That, at present remains the \$64,000 question.

Top headlines this week

- 'Labour unveils plans to aid training and recruitment of head teachers.' (**Monday**)
- 'MPs criticise lax oversight of £1.2bn higher education expansion.' (**Tuesday**)
- 'Student loans system is not sustainable warns leading economist.' (**Wednesday**)
- 'New commission on primary assessment.' (**Thursday**)
- 'Labour to reveal how it would fund cut in tuition fees.' (**Friday**)

People/organisations in the news this week

- The Labour Party who are about to announce plans to reduce the tuition fee for higher education in England
- Ed Miliband who spoke to the Creative Industries Federation and pledged that a future Labour government would back creative education and the arts
- The Education Secretary who announced the first 27 schools and organisations each awarded £15,000 to help promote pupil character and resilience
- The Schools Minister who set out government thinking on assessment in primary education in a speech to the Reform think tank
- Minister for Intellectual Property Baroness Neville-Rolfe who called for a better balance between accessibility and protection as part of a speech on the UK's vision for a digital single market
- The DfE who published further guidance on the Progress 8 accountability measure in preparation for its implementation in some cases from this year
- The All Party Parliamentary Group who highlighted the importance of supporting families and children in the first two years of a child's life
- The North East of England which saw a £330m Growth Deal for the region signed off that included a package on skills improvement
- The BIS Dept who looked at the lessons to be learnt from last year's setting up of the first new FE college incorporation for 20 years and concluded that the process may need some revamping
- The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) who published a new strategic plan for 2015-2020 with a big push on increasing the numbers of disadvantaged students entering more selective universities
- The Public Accounts Committee who published a report taking the government to task for failing to set up adequate regulation for any expansion of the HE market particularly to alternative providers
- HEFCE whose latest report on the participation of young people in England entering higher education between 2006 and 2013 revealed a significant increase in the number holding L3 BTEC qualifications
- Sir William Wakeham and Sir Nigel Shadbolt who will lead reviews of STEM and computer science HE accreditation respectively following the government's recent Science and Innovation Strategy
- Professor Sir Ian Diamond who as Chair of the Universities UK Efficiency Task Group published a new report on efficiency and value for money in the UKHE sector claiming that the sector has made over £1bn in cost savings over the last 3 years
- UCAS who announced that its 'Extra' process is now open and running until the end of June for those applicants who haven't yet received or confirmed an offer and want to make an extra choice
- Developers, Freeriders, Organisers, Plodders, Recruiters, Survivors, Trainers, different categories of small and medium businesses identified in a report by the UK Commission looking at how such businesses approach training
- FE and training providers facing further significant budget cuts for adult skills provision as the latest funding grant letter is released
- Dr Lynne Sedgemore who announced plans to retire later this year after seven years exec director of the 157 Group and over 30 years in FE generally

- The 2011 Wolf report on vocational learning for young people which four years on from its publication has now seen most of its recommendations acted on
- Ofqual who published the results of a survey into which factors influence schools and colleges when they make purchasing decisions about particular qualifications and awarding bodies
- Glenys Stacey, Ofqual Chief Regulator who spoke about how the current qualification reform programme was going and cautioned an incoming government against changing too much
- Professor Graham Donaldson who called for learning from ages 3 to 16 to be a continuum without phases and key stages as he completed a major review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales
- Exceptional school middle leaders, over a hundred of whom will be 'invited' to apply for year-long postings to help support underperforming schools in parts of the country
- The Education Endowment Foundation who launched a new report to help schools make better use of Teaching Assistants
- Shanghai maths teachers, a second group of whom arrived this week to help support the maths exchange programme launched last year
- Former head teacher John McIntosh who will chair the new 'teacher-led' commission on helping primary schools develop best practice in assessment without levels
- School absences which according to new research published by the DfE showed that for instance a pupil who didn't miss any schooling at key stage 2 was 4.5 times more likely to achieve L5 or above than those who had missed 15-20% of the time
- The professional association ASCL who launched its blueprint for a self-improving school system built around a new architecture and seven key elements

Tweet(s) of the week

- *"Just snapchat me: the new way to stay in touch with university tutors.2 @ed_ontap*
- *"Students seriously under challenged by the books they are given at school, study claims." @SchoolsImprove*

Acronym(s) of the Week

- POLAR. Participation of Local Area, used in helping define areas of advantage/disadvantage when it comes to participation in higher education

Quote(s) of the week

- *"I come here with an offer: to put policy for arts and culture and creativity at the heart of the next Labour Government's mission."* Ed Miliband on Labour's offer to the creative sector
- *"My little granddaughters scratch at magazines as though they were operating an iPad, digital natives to the core."* The BIS Dept's Minister for IP on modern digital natives
- *"Validity is the degree to which it is possible to measure what needs to be measured by implementing an assessment procedure."* The Chief Exec of Ofqual on the meaning of validity
- *"Levels have been a distracting, over-generalised label, giving misleading signals about the genuine attainment of pupils."* The Schools Minister on why prescribed assessment levels in primary had to go

Number(s) of the week

- 11%. The size of the cut to the adult skills budget for 2015/16
- £735m. The amount of money being put in to support fair access into higher education this year
- 27. The number of recommendations in the 2011 Wolf Report where 20 have now been fully implemented, 6 are in the process of and one (No 13 on carrying forward credit to a later date) partially so
- Tenfold. The volume increase between 2006 and 2013 in the number of people entering HE with a combination of A level and BTEC qualifications (from 2,100 to 21,00)

What to look out for next week

- Times HE, HEPI and OU Hustings on HE and the 2015 Election (Monday)
- Education Committee witness session on starting school (Wednesday)