

2014/2

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Pocket Watch – What’s in store for the FE sector in 2014?

Introduction

2014 is shaping up to be a big year for the FE sector. Institutional structures are once again under the spotlight with the Government keen to see colleges develop as social enterprises and Labour as licensed Institutes of Technical Education. Both Parties are also keen to see further developments in vocational learning, building on important Reports last year from the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning, the FE Learning and Technology Group and the Whitehead Review. The skills system too is likely to see a number of important developments this year including the emergence of Local Growth Deals, the launch of three LEP Skills Funding Pilots and further work on apprenticeship and employer funding. Other changes may follow the publication of the Heywood Youth Unemployment Review, the Adonis Growth Review and Labour’s Skills Taskforce 14-19 and Regional Skills Policy Reviews, all due this year and added to the mix should be two important think tank Inquiries, one by Demos into apprenticeships and the other by IPPR into FE. Tot that lot up and it’s clear that FE is at the centre of a lot of attention in 2014.

The Year Ahead

Let’s start with the political interest at least in institutional structures. We’ve already had the emergence of the Gazelle Group and further talk last year of elite colleges and career colleges with the driving force behind most institutional change at present being greater responsiveness be it to learners, employers, communities, sector needs or all four. Quite how far things will develop this year is hard to say at present but for all providers, strengthening employer relationships and understanding local market needs will be key priorities.

For the Government, the aim behind colleges as social enterprises is not just greater responsiveness but greater access to non-government sources of funding, an important factor in college survival these days and likely to be enhanced by the launch of the chartered status scheme due to be announced shortly. Labour is pitching its case around a more distinctive Tech College model, focusing on high-quality intermediate and technician training especially for young people through a recognised Tech Bacc and delivered by accredited or licensed colleges. Three years on from the ‘freedoms and flexibilities’ envisaged in the *New Challenges, New Chances FE Reform Programme*, developments in these and other institutional models will be watched keenly throughout the year.

A second major theme this year and a core component in any institutional development is raising the bar in vocational learning. The ground work for this has been laid by the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning over the last couple of years and is being carried forward by the newly established Education and Training Foundation (ETF.)

Further announcements from the ETF are due in the coming months but three are of immediate interest. First revised professional standards for teachers and trainers, a big issue with Labour pressing for a qualified and updated workforce (“*all FE lecturers teaching young people should hold a teaching qualification and a L2 or above in English and maths*”) and where the ETF will launch consultation on revised standards shortly. Secondly, and a follow on, a big emphasis on English and maths, again driven heavily by Labour’s vision of colleges using their vocational contexts to help revitalise learning in these two core subjects and where the Government has already launched enhancement programmes for maths teachers and will follow up this summer with similar programmes for English teachers. And third what the Dept is calling “*agile implementation*” of new technology in teaching, learning and assessment, much of it coming from the 40 recommendations in last year’s FELTAG Report. Whether a voc MOOC emerges for FE this year remains to be seen but the sense is growing that as in HE, an avalanche of new learning approaches is coming which will revitalise much of how the sector operates.

A third theme for 2014 and one never far away is apprenticeships where this year the long haul

towards implementing the Richard reforms will gain momentum with the first of the new employer owned standards and assessment strategies coming through from initial Trailblazers in February/March and the first apprenticeships delivered under the new system before the end of the year. Also this year, more Trailblazers come on stream, the De-regulation Bill amending earlier legislation on apprenticeships begins its passage through Parliament, additional money starts to come through to deliver the extra 20,000 higher apprenticeships promised in the Autumn Statement and a consultation on some of the more technical aspects of an employer-based funding system gets under way. Labour too has considerable interest in apprenticeships and its proposals on apprenticeship reform can be seen in its Skills Taskforce Report published last autumn where the emphasis was very much on the creation of a 'universal gold-standard' for apprenticeships with employer-led sector bodies taking the lead in delivering a system focused on L3 training. Both Parties seem likely therefore to continue their interest in apprenticeships throughout 2014 and the publication of a Report from Demos, due early in the year let alone National Apprenticeship Week at the start of March are both likely to provoke further activity in this area.

A fourth and also never far away theme is training provision for young people where the Government has put its weight behind the development of the Traineeship programme, the T in Matthew Hancock's 4 TASQ priorities for 2014. Last month's Autumn Statement pledged small amounts of additional money to support youth training through for instance Jobcentre Plus and other job placement schemes but concerns remain as the Prince's Trust recent Youth Index has highlighted about the extent of youth unemployment and the employability skills of young people. Both Parties have important Reports coming through this year, the Government on provision for 16-25 year olds and Labour on 14-19 provision and the design of the Tech Bacc. The next set of labour market stats are due on 22 January but whether youth unemployment continues to drop as it did in the Q3 figures or not, there's growing interest in developing a more coherent transition track for young people, modelled perhaps on best international practice.

A final theme for 2014 for the moment at least is the continuing transformation of the skills system increasingly now divested from central Government planning and coming under employer ownership and local planning structures. The Government has earmarked a minimum £2bn a year from 2015/16 for local growth arrangements and by high summer this year, LEP Local Growth Deals should be signed off in preparation for this. A key question here is what role colleges and training providers will play in these local arrangements which is why there might be considerable interest in the three pilots being launched this year in the West of England, the North East and Stoke and Staffs LEP areas where such relationships will be tested out. Labour too is keen to see local providers play a stronger role in locally-responsive provision and last month launched its own advisory group to look at the effectiveness of local supply chains and the development of regional skills policy. At the same time the Adonis Growth review is looking at how best to support city-led growth. A welcome boost this year will come from the new round of EU funding which starts in 2014 and runs until 2020 and which will help support investment and skills training particularly in deprived areas.

Plenty to take in but other issues worth keeping an eye on this year include: provider performance, improving according to the recent Ofsted Annual Report but now with speedier intervention arrangements under the new FE Commissioner and already making an impact; Ofqual's review of the QCF due to compete this year; the first teaching of new Tech Levels due to commence this autumn; 16-19 accountability arrangements due to be confirmed shortly; Reports from both Ofsted and Labour on 14-19 provision; continuing interest in local employer-led partnerships and possible evaluations of the early implementation of both Traineeships and 24+ loans. Thick and fast in other words.



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Year Ahead for FE Jan 2014