

Sector Developments

EBacc setback as flack forces backtrack

Michael Gove, the Minister for Education, has scrapped his controversial plans to replace GCSE's with a new English Baccalaureate (EBacc). GCSE's will now remain although Mr Gove says that they will be reformed in order 'to restore confidence in them'. His decision to drop the EBacc comes in the wake of warnings from members of the House of Commons Education Select Committee that his plans 'threatened to wreck the stability of the entire examination system' and that 'the case for the abolition of GCSE's in key academic subjects had not been proved'. Mr Gove had already been warned by the chief executive of Ofqual that his proposed timescale for introducing the EBacc 'could pose a significant risk to the safe and continued delivery of all qualifications'. And just for good measure, Mr Gove's own civil servants advised him that his proposals to give responsibility for the accreditation of each of the core subjects to just one exam board 'could breach European Union rules on competition' and 'be open to challenge through judicial review'. The Welsh Assembly had already resolved to retain GCSE's and the Northern Ireland Assembly was widely expected to follow suit, particularly since John O'Dowd, the Northern Ireland Education Minister, has described the EBacc as being more of an 'E back of a fag packet'. Mr Gove will nevertheless go ahead with his plans to replace continuous assessment with time constrained examinations at the end of both GCSE and A Level courses. This is apparently because he believes that continuous assessment 'encourages spoon-feeding' and 'lacks academic rigour'. It will be interesting to see if Mr Gove also tries to persuade universities to abandon modular and in-course assessment for their 'learners'. (If you want a bit of fun with a university academic try referring to their university as a 'provider' and calling their students 'learners').

This is the second time that Mr Gove has been forced to abandon his plans to replace GCSE's. Last year, his proposals for a new two tier examination structure were dropped in the face of widespread concerns that they looked suspiciously like an attempt to re-introduce GCE O levels and Certificates in Secondary Education (CSE's). At present, it remains unclear as to what impact the decision to drop the EBacc will have on plans for the introduction of a Higher Baccalaureate (HBacc) and Technical Baccalaureate (TecBacc). There also remains a high level of anxiety that, although the EBacc may have gone, at this very moment, somewhere, deep in the bowels of Whitehall offices, a bunch of spotty faced junior civil servants are feverishly working away on the next batch of daft projects and initiatives to foist on the sector.

FE Colleges disadvantaged by emphasis on performance in 'facilitating subjects' at GCE A Level

New GCE A level performance measures introduced in 2011/12 include a measure showing how many students achieved 3 GCE A levels at the 'AAB' grade (or above) in mathematics, English literature, biology, physics, chemistry, history, geography and languages. These are referred to as 'facilitating subjects' and are considered to be the key A Levels to obtain for those students seeking to enter one of the 'Russell Group' universities. In 2011/12, around 25,000 FE College students achieved AAB grades in 'facilitating subjects', however around 75,000 FE College students went on to obtain places at the top universities in that year. This would suggest that getting AAB grades in three 'facilitating subjects' may not be the only means of obtaining a place at a Russell Group university. In turn, this has led to concerns that the failure to recognise the wider qualification achievements of FE College students that gained places at 'top' universities means that FE College performance is being understated in the new league tables. Critics have also objected to student achievement in BTEC Extended National Diplomas being downgraded in the new tables, in spite of the fact that they continue to retain the same Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) points score tariff. They go on to argue that FE Colleges have now been given a perverse incentive *not* to offer equally rigorous GCE A Levels in vocational subjects and vocational GCE A Level equivalents that the government and employers are trying to encourage more students to take up.

Judicial Review upholds Ofqual decision not to amend GCSE grade boundaries in England

Unlike in Wales and Northern Ireland, where GCSE grade boundaries were altered in the wake of last summer's grade debacle, the Office for Qualifications and Examination Regulations (Ofqual) refused to amend GCSE grades in England. This prompted a number of schools, local authorities and teaching unions to combine in order to seek a judicial review of Ofqual's decision. However, to the surprise of many, the Review judges found in Ofqual's favour and the decision *not* to amend GCSE grade boundaries in England was upheld. The judgement has implications for those colleges that accepted students who had not obtained the required GCSE grades required for some level 3 programmes, in the general expectation that their grades would be revised upwards by the outcome of the judicial review, before their courses ended.

Northern Ireland Assembly votes to retain Education Maintenance Allowances (EMA's)

The Northern Ireland Assembly has followed the lead of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly and has voted to retain access means tested EMA's for young people aged 16-18 in full time education. In 2011, the UK Parliament in Westminster, which has 59 Scottish MP's, 40 Welsh MP's and 18 Northern Ireland MP's (including MP's who are members of the nationalist Plaid Cymru, Sinn Fein and Scottish National Party) voted to abolish means tested EMA's for 16-18 year olds in full time education in England. In that year, UK Parliament also voted to raise university tuition fees for students in England to a maximum of £9000. Meanwhile the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies voted to peg tuition fees at £3,290 for students in Wales and Northern Ireland and the Scottish Parliament voted to retain free university tuition for students in Scotland (and for other student from within the EU but from outside of the rest of the UK). The previous Labour government first introduced tuition fees. The vote to do so was very tight and the government relied heavily on MP's whose constituencies were in Scotland to get the legislation through.

Rapid contraction in numbers of GCSE equivalent vocational courses and qualifications in schools

In January 2013, following recommendations made in the Wolf Report, around 96% of GCSE equivalent vocational qualifications will no longer count towards measuring performance in the national league tables. The Edge Foundation has funded the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) to ascertain the impact of this change on the range of qualifications offered by schools. The IPPR research findings reveal that:

- 60% of schools are planning to cease offering GCSE equivalent vocational qualifications.
- 66% of schools have already cut some, or all, of the vocational qualifications they previously offered
- 79% of schools agreed that vocational courses helped prepare school leavers for the world of work.
- 69% of schools agreed that vocational courses helped prepare school leavers for further study.
- However, 5% of schools said that they would no longer be offering GCSE equivalent vocational courses because they did not actually believe that they were of any real value.

The Association of Colleges (AoC) has warned that this could have unpredictable consequences for future levels of enrolment on FE courses and on apprenticeship programmes.

SFA to cease funding qualifications with low levels of enrolment

The Skills Funding Agency (SFA) has announced that from August 2013 it intends to cease funding more than 1,000 qualifications. The Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) has said that this will 'destabilise the system' and 'cut across the free functioning of the market for qualifications'. However the SFA has countered this by pointing out that in the last academic year, more than 1,000 qualifications had fewer than 100 enrolments, and that a further 1,440 qualifications had no enrolments at all.

Sixth Form Colleges call for their own equivalent of FE 'Chartered Status'

Despite significantly outperforming school sixth forms at a lower cost, the SFCF has warned that sixth form colleges are being increasingly marginalised by Department for Education's (DfE's) focus on academies. The SFCF claims that many academies are 'erroneously referring to themselves as colleges, despite significant differences in legal status' and is now calling for sixth form colleges to be given the opportunity to acquire their own 'chartered status' in order to protect the sixth form college 'brand'.

Increased pressure on schools to provide impartial advice on post 16 FE options

Last year, the responsibility for providing careers information was transferred from local authorities to schools, and a new statutory duty was introduced that requires schools to provide their pupils with impartial and independent information, advice and guidance. However, FE colleges argue that schools are not being adequately monitored to ensure they comply with this statutory duty. This view is supported by the findings of a recent AoC survey that found that although 18% of colleges were granted 'significant' access to pupils at local schools, another 74% of colleges said that schools 'would not even distribute their prospectuses'. In January, the House of Commons Education Select Committee published its own report, which raised 'serious concerns' about the 'consistency, quality, independence and impartiality of the guidance currently offered in schools'. The report reinforces concerns in respect of the failure of schools to inform pupils about the vocational options available to them in FE colleges and draws attention to a potential 'conflict between the interests of their learners and the school's interest in trying to keep pupils in the sixth form because of funding'. The report goes on to recommend that Ofsted should formally inspect the impartiality of careers advice in schools. However a spokesperson for Ofsted said that before making the final decision to change the inspection framework, it would first be necessary to carry out a 'thematic survey' to ascertain the scale of the problem.

Colleges call for parity of treatment with schools and academies

FE and Sixth Form Colleges are collectively required to pay around £250 million each year in VAT while school and academy sixth forms are exempt from paying the charge. Following extensive lobbying by the AoC and the Sixth Form Colleges' Forum (SFCF), Schools Minister, David Laws has now formally acknowledged the anomaly and has said that he was 'sympathetic to concerns expressed about the different VAT treatment that colleges receive'. In addition, Treasury Minister, Danny Alexander has agreed 'to look at the VAT situation again in the next spending round'. VAT is just one example of inequality of treatment of colleges compared to schools and academies. Another is that school and academy sixth form students are entitled to free school meals, whereas FE and sixth form college students are not. Mr Laws has also responded positively to this anomaly, and said that the government was 'currently looking at options for extending free school meals eligibility to all 16-19 year olds in full time education'.

Private training providers call for parity of treatment with colleges

FE colleges failing to meet their recruitment targets in 2011/12 have collectively been allowed by the SFA to keep a total of around £85 million of funding (which, in effect, has been received for provision that was not actually delivered). Now, the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) is demanding that the SFA should apply the same rules to private trainers, arguing that either all types of provider should be allowed keep a proportion of any overpayment they receive, or that none should. The AELP has also called for private trainers to be considered equally with FE colleges for the redistribution of any SFA funding that becomes available through any future collective under delivery of provision by the FE college sector.

FE colleges not yet ready to recruit students aged 14-16

From September 2013, all colleges that have been rated 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted will be eligible to recruit full time 14 year old students. Colleges that were awarded either the old 'satisfactory' grade, or the new 'requires improvement' grade, will also be able to recruit 14-16 year olds, *if* they can demonstrate that they have made progress in improving their quality since their last inspection. However, the ministerial delays in announcing the new arrangements means that only a handful of eligible colleges will actually be in a position to recruit 14 year olds this September (although many more have indicated that they will do so in September 2014). Those colleges that are recruiting 14 year olds this September say that they will aim to enrol between 100 and 150 students, this being roughly equal to the annual intake of a secondary school. Because provision for 14-16 year old students must also be delivered in a specific dedicated area, some colleges say that a shortage of space will restrict the numbers of 14-16 year olds they can accommodate.

New 'Provider Quality Dashboard' to be launched by the National careers Service (NCS)

The SFA's 'FE Choices' and Ofsted 'Learner View' websites will soon be joined by a new NCS 'Provider Quality Dashboard' website. The new website is scheduled to be introduced in April this year, and will rate providers according to the quality of the course information they upload to the 'Dashboard directory'. As a bare minimum, course information uploaded must include a course summary, entry requirements and a course specific web address. The AoC has already raised concerns about the complexities of uploading of significant amounts of course data and the Dashboard's overall functionality. In response to these concerns, a spokesperson for the NCS has made things crystal clear by explaining that 'The Provider Quality Dashboard is intended to support conversations about course directory data quality between relationship managers and learning providers and to show to learning providers the reasons why their data may not always be found through the course directory'. It would be hard to make up stuff like this.

More colleges contest Ofsted inspection outcomes

Ofsted does not publish the details of complaints about inspections, but as a result of a question asked in Parliament, it has been revealed that around 20% of the colleges inspected by Ofsted in 2011/12 (9 FE and 2 Sixth Form) lodged an official complaint. Of these, 7 colleges raised concerns about the overall inspection judgement they had been given, while the other 4 lodged complaints about 'inspector conduct' and 'competence'. Not that this did them any good however, because (for the second year in a row) none of the complaints were upheld. The AoC has now called on Ofsted to establish 2 new separate complaints systems, one for complaints about the inspection process, and one for dealing with complaints about inspection judgements. The AoC has also called for more transparency, with the outcomes of both types of complaint be published (anonymously, if necessary) on Ofsted's website.

Ironically, Ofsted has commenced a consultation on changes to its complaints procedures, but not in the way that colleges had hoped. At present, a college can lodge a complaint either during an inspection, or up to 30 days after an inspection report has been published. However, Ofsted is now proposing to reduce the time limit for complaints about inspections to either within 5 days of an incident occurring during an inspection, or if the complaint is about the content of an inspection report, to within 5 days of the report being published. Furthermore, Ofsted is proposing that complaints received after this period should *not* be considered at all. Ofsted also wants to be able to publish inspection reports *before* complaints are investigated. The consultation period on the proposals ended more than 3 months ago, but Ofsted says it will not be publishing the responses until 1 April. Hopefully there is no significance in the choice of this date.

Ofsted Chief Inspector says that there are 'no consequences' for colleges that fail

Earlier this month (February), Sir Michael Wilshaw presented his annual report to the House of Commons Select Committee. Amongst the many negative comments he made about the FE sector, Sir Michael once again said that he finds the FE sector 'worrying'. One of the reasons he gave for being so worried was that he thought that the quality of education in colleges was being adversely affected by an excessive focus by college leaders on 'capital funding, external reach and going abroad'. Sir Michael's went on to say that 'if a school becomes inadequate, the head usually goes, and something usually happens to the governing board'. However, he went on to say that he 'did not sense the same clear consequences for failure in the FE sector'. Staff in colleges that have been judged 'inadequate' by Ofsted, might be forgiven for thinking that Sir Michael's 'sense' of how serious the consequences really are, is also 'inadequate'.

Ofsted gets Regional Directors

Following an internal re-organisation, Ofsted has announced the appointment of 6 regional directors. These will be responsible for 'the quality of inspection in their region, along with the improvement of standards in childcare, schools, and learning and skills'. The regions covered are the North West, the North East, the Midlands, the East of England and London, the South East and the South West. The new Regional Directors will retain their existing roles in Ofsted, for example the Regional Director for the South East is Matthew Coffey, who will also remain as Head of Learning and Skills at Ofsted.

Decline continues in 16-18 apprenticeship numbers

Despite an increase of 16.3% in the total number of apprenticeship starts in 2011/12, data contained in the 'First Statistical Release' reveals that there was a 1.3% fall in the numbers of 16-18 year olds taking up apprenticeships, compared with 2010/11. This downward trend seems to be accelerating, with provisional figures for the first quarter of 2012/13 showing a 7.4% fall in the number of 16-18 apprenticeship starts compared to the first quarter of 2011/12. In response, FE minister, Matthew Hancock said that the contraction was 'worrying' but added that the government was 'taking action' and that 'the planned introduction of traineeships would help'. Mr Hancock went on to say that he believed that a number of factors could be behind the contraction, including 'the government's attempt to tackle poor provision', 'the requirement for apprenticeships for 16-18 year olds to be of at least 12 months duration' and the 'impact of the recession on apprenticeship recruitment'. However, he said that he 'did not think that the decision to cut the funding rate for 16-18 apprenticeships by 2% last year had been a contributory factor'.

The total monetary value of the under achievement by providers against 16-18 apprenticeship targets in 2011/12 amounted to more than £61 million, representing a shortfall of around 8% of the SFA's total 16-18 apprenticeship allocation. Pearson topped the tables for the single largest under delivery of 16-18 apprenticeships with the firm failing to deliver around £10.2 million of its SFA £36.2 million allocation. David Way, chief executive the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) said that the NAS 'would be stepping up its marketing campaign aimed at recruiting 16-18 year olds', and added that this would be supported by the extension of the apprenticeship grant for employers (see below). However he conceded that increasing the number 16 to 18 apprenticeships was proving to be 'a major challenge'.

Extension of apprenticeship grant for employers

The government has confirmed the extension of the 'Apprenticeship Grant for Employers of 16-24 year olds' (now referred to as AGE 16-24) to March 2014. Eligibility for the £1500 grant has also been extended from businesses with up to 250 employees to businesses with up to 1,000 employees. For the 2012/13 financial year only, employers can claim the grant for up to 10 ten apprentices.

Increase in funding rate has unintended consequences

At the AoC Annual Conference last November, FE minister Matthew Hancock announced that the amount paid for functional skills courses in English and mathematics was to be 'more than doubled'. Unfortunately, the otherwise welcome increase in the funding rate appears to have had a detrimental effect on the overall volume of provision that can be afforded. Although providers are now receiving more funding for the same level of provision, they are reaching their funding targets much earlier than was expected. This might be welcomed by colleges struggling to hit their own funding targets, but with little or no additional funding being available, many private trainers have claimed that they have been forced to abandon the apprenticeships and other courses that they had been planning to start in the second half of this year. This has led to the AELP intensifying its calls for the government to allow private trainers to access to any funds that become available as a result of under delivery by FE colleges.

Graduate apprenticeships for the professions to be introduced

FE minister, Matthew Hancock has announced that graduate and post graduate level apprenticeships will soon be available in areas such as law, accountancy and advanced engineering. From 2013/14, changes to the 'Specification of Apprentices Standards for England' (SASE) will mean that level 6 and level 7 apprenticeships will be made available for the first time, thereby 'providing a high quality alternative to the traditional higher education route into the professions'. Commenting on the introduction of these new apprenticeships, Mr Hancock said that 'In the past, apprenticeships were restricted to trades', but that the government was now 'introducing apprenticeships in all types of jobs, including a new route to the professions, to ensure everyone can reach their potential'. In the past, people usually became MP's after a period spent doing some sort of proper job, but given the number of MP's who, on leaving university, now enter parliament after an 'internship' in Whitehall or Brussels as some sort of researcher, advisor or general hanger-on (and this includes the current leaders of the 3 main parties) it will be interesting to see if level 6 and 7 apprenticeships will be offered for those wishing to embark on a career in politics.

Introduction of apprenticeships for under-25's with special needs

Following amendments to the Children and Families Bill, young people under the age of 25 with special needs will be entitled to apply to participate in apprenticeships. The amendments were made after it was discovered that the new arrangements for people with special educational needs, did not provide for an apprenticeship option. Alongside the change, a new funding system has been introduced that involves a 'single assessment and care plan covering education, health and social care from birth to age 25', and for the first time gives young people with learning disabilities and difficulties will have a legal right to participate in the full range of post 16 education and training opportunities, with local authorities being given the responsibility for assessing the level of support needed. The changes have been broadly welcomed, but concerns have been raised that there will be far more demand for provision than budgets can cater for

These concerns have unfortunately proved to be well founded. This year, the level of demand for FE provision from young people with SLDD has exceeded the £640 million budget available by 40%. This has meant that the Education Funding Agency (EFA) has only been able to fund around 25% of the total demand for provision, with some colleges having to use their own financial reserves to top up the resources needed for their SLDD students. In response to this, Schools Minister David Laws has insisted that the government was 'not using the change as an opportunity to cut funding overall' and claimed that 'post-16 special needs funding had risen 9% since 2011'. He went on to suggest that 'some local authorities may have exaggerated the scale of the support needed, since there has been an increase in demand at post-16 level that has not been seen in younger age groups'.

Employers are not to be required to disclose their contribution to the cost of training programmes

After concerns were raised that employers were not making an adequate contribution to the cost of their apprenticeships and other training programmes, members of the Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) Select Committee recommended that they should be required to account to SFA for the cash and 'in-kind' contributions they made to these programmes. However, after giving consideration to the recommendation, ministers rejected the proposal on the basis that such a requirement would be 'too bureaucratic' and 'could put employers off engaging with these programmes'. The chair of the BIS Select Committee said that the rejection of the Committee's recommendation was 'disappointing'.

Contractors are to be required to publish their subcontracting arrangements

In 1998 a Labour Government was in office and George Mudie MP was the minister for Further Education. Mr Mudie was reported as saying that he could understand FE colleges being provided with public money to deliver courses for free, or to help sell courses to employers, but he couldn't understand why FE colleges should be given public funds to *buy* courses from other providers. (He was probably also a bit confused when, over a 4 year period, he somehow managed to claim £62,000 in expenses for the £26,000 mortgage on his London flat). Those of you with long enough memories will recognise that when Mr Mudie talked about colleges 'buying provision', he was in fact referring to 'franchising'. This was a practice that resulted in some very strange courses being delivered on behalf of colleges by some very dubious organisations. The delivery of these courses often took place at a considerable geographical distance away from the college, (which could be quite convenient, since the students did not always exist). Needless to say, franchising came to take up an inordinate amount of the time and resources of both the police and the Serious Fraud Office. Unfortunately, it also led to some quite spectacular college failures and tarnished the reputation of the FE sector as a whole. When the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) was eventually replaced by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), independent training providers in both the private and the voluntary sector were allowed direct access to public funds. This eliminated the need for many of these organisations to have to enter into franchising arrangements with colleges since they could now acquire their own funds directly from the LSC.

Franchising still exists today, but it is now referred to as 'subcontracting'. It will perhaps come as no great surprise to learn that the practice is under the spotlight once again, this time, as a result of the findings of an Ofsted report entitled 'Ensuring Quality in Apprenticeships'. The report says that many subcontractors felt that they got 'poor value for money' for the management and administrative fees charged by contractors

(many of which are FE colleges). These fees usually involve the contractor holding back a significant proportion of the SFA funding they receive for the provision that is delivered on their behalf by the subcontractor. The report goes on to allege that many contractors do this 'as a way of generating income for doing little work', and that the deduction 'significantly reduces the amount of funding available to be spent on learners at the point of delivery'. As evidence of this, the report says that in 2011/12, an average of 23% of the SFA funding received for provision that was subcontracted, was withheld from subcontractors to cover the contractor's 'management and administrative costs'.

In response to Ofsted's criticism, from August 2013 the SFA will be introducing new rules that will require contractors to publish details of their subcontracting arrangements on their websites. The details required to be published will include, 'as a minimum', the level of management and administrative fees that subcontractors are charged and the services the subcontractor is provided with in return for these fees'. Contractors will also be expected to explain *why* subcontracting arrangements are being entered into, and how these arrangements will benefit the learner and enhance the quality of provision. It also seems that, from now on, it is unlikely that, '*to enable us to meet our SFA recruitment and funding targets*', will be regarded as an acceptable reason for a contractor to enter into subcontracting arrangements.

'Common Accord' guidance on good practice in subcontracting published by the AoC and AELP

Meanwhile, in an attempt to keep the subcontracting process as self regulatory as possible, the AoC and the AELP have joined forces to develop a voluntary code of practice called the 'Common Accord'. The 'Common Accord' is intended to provide guidance to FE colleges and independent providers on the way in which subcontracting and 'supply chain management' should be carried out. All contractors in direct receipt of SFA funding are strongly advised to follow the guidance given, which includes:

- 'Assessing subcontractors to ensure that they meet the required quality standards',
- 'Supporting subcontractors to develop excellent operating practices'
- 'Establishing if the management fees that subcontractors are charged have consistently proved to reflect the actual costs of services being provided by the contractor.'

Second round of Employer Ownership of Skills Pilot (EOP) announced

Employers have been invited to bid for a share of £150 million which is being made available through the second round of the EOP to enable them to create the training schemes they say they are needed to grow their companies. This brings total government investment in the EOP to £250 million. EOP funds are now administered by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP's) and the deadline for bids is 28 March 2013.

New £6 million fund for teaching English as a second or other language (ESOL)

As part of the government's commitment to promote integration and community cohesion, the Department for Communities and Local Government has announced a new £6 million fund 'to support innovative ways to teach English to people from established communities, but whose primary language is not English'. The new fund will be specifically targeted at 'those people who may *not* previously have accessed English language tuition'. Because the new provision is primarily intended to support social integration rather than employability skills, it will complement, rather than replace, ESOL provision funded through the SFA.

New research shows that participation in FE improves career prospects

A new report from BIS entitled 'The Impact of Learning' shows that the primary motive for participating in FE is 'to improve job prospects or get a new job'. The report shows that on completing an FE course:

- 33% of both men and women obtained a better job
- 18% of men and 12% of women obtained a promotion
- Earnings increased by an average of 2.75%
- 58% reported a higher level of job satisfaction
- 80% reported increased self-confidence and self-esteem

- 58% of women and 47% of men were better able to support their children with their school work
- 50% take out a (low cost) FE loan to assist with the cost of taking a higher level college course.

NEET's need more help to overcome the barriers they face

Meanwhile, as youth unemployment once more approaches the 1 million mark, a further report from BIS indicates that around half of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) 'have high aspirations to study and to get into work'. (Sadly, this would seem to suggest that the other half don't). The research also reveals that most NEET's had a 'negative perception of the relevance of what was on offer'. Around 10% said they 'struggled to find accurate information about courses' and 16% said that they 'faced financial constraints which prevented them re-entering full time education'. Almost all of the young people involved in the research said that, to a greater or lesser degree, 'they lacked self confidence'.

FE to get its own research centre

Having been relieved by the government of its former responsibilities, and no doubt looking for something meaningful to do, the Institute for Learning (IfL) has recently joined forces with the University of Wolverhampton to launch of a new centre for research into FE teaching that will be called the Centre for Research and Development in Lifelong Education (or CRADLE for short). CRADLE will focus on conducting research into teachers' first years in the classroom. Hopefully, someone in the organisation will have a sufficiently well developed sense of humour to suggest that, at some stage in the future, the centre should also conduct research into grant related activities in vocational education (or GRAVE for short).

The FE Guild may not be called the FE Guild

After receiving numerous comments arguing that the use of medieval terminology may not be particularly appropriate for describing an organisation purporting to represent a modern skills sector, the steering group overseeing the development of the FE Guild has said that the word 'Guild' may be dropped. Dropping the word 'Guild' does not necessarily mean that 'the FE Guild' will now just be called 'the FE.....'

The Leadership Exchange

As part of its swansong, LSIS is establishing the 'Leadership Exchange' which is due to become fully operational by September 2013. Contrary to what you might think, the Leadership Exchange is not about enabling colleges to trade in their existing principals for new ones. However, it does seek to develop 'excellent leadership, sound management and good governance' across the FE sector. In doing so, the Leadership Exchange will also seek to address '3 major FE leadership challenges', which LSIS says are:

- 'Identifying the leadership skills, knowledge and behaviours needed by today's leaders to support their development and to inspire outstanding leadership of learning within efficient and commercially sustainable organisations'.
- 'Identifying and developing a critical mass of new leaders to replace those leaving the sector, through a co-ordinated and proactive sector-wide approach'.
- 'Recruiting more governors, trustees and non-executive directors with the right knowledge, behaviour and experience'

Deptford and Delhi

FE minister, Matthew Hancock recently visited India and during his visit he opened the AoC India Office and New College Nottingham's 'Lifestyle Academy' in Delhi. Mr Hancock also announced the creation of a new 10 person unit to promote UK education in India and the Middle East. The new unit is being jointly sponsored by BIS and UK trade and Industry (UKTI) and will be called 'Education UK'. The main role of Education UK will be 'to identify and research new opportunities for UK education exports, including FE exports'. Mr Hancock said that the UK education sector was 'in a global race' and that other countries were already 'presenting attractive and coordinated offers'. The reason given for the initial focus on India was that the Indian Government has expressed its intention that by 2020 '500 million people over the age of 16

will have received training in a technical or vocational subject' with the education ministers of a number of Indian states saying that they are interested in jointly developing UK programmes in India.

'Here comes the new LEP, just like the old TEC.....'

In the beginning (or at least, in the early 1990's) were the Training and Enterprise Councils (TEC's). The Conservative Government established 82 TEC's with a brief to work with local employers and to help them to grow by developing the skills of the local labour force. Each TEC was independent of every other TEC and the scale of their operations varied greatly. For instance the Kent TEC was a large scale operation fully integrated into the Kent County Council, while the Wigan TEC was based in a lock up garage. Critics of the TEC's accused them of being inefficient, unaccountable and generally pointless. The TEC's introduced lots of schemes, some of which were just mad and some of which offered significant opportunities for scallywag trainers to fraudulently make lots of money. Then, in 1992, the Conservative Government took FE and Sixth Form colleges out of local authority control and established them as independent corporations. They also established the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) to be the conduit for allocating public funds to colleges. The FEFC was a central body with regional offices, but it did not have a strategic planning role since each college was required to develop its own strategic plan which the FEFC, in effect, 'bought'. It was hoped that the TEC's and the FEFC would work effectively together, but they didn't

A Labour government was elected in 1997 and immediately decided on a more regional approach to promoting growth, employment and developing the skills of the local labour force. Therefore in 1998, Regional Development Agencies (RDA's) were established for each of the nine English regions. The government also came to the conclusion that the FEFC and the TEC's were a waste of space and so, in 2001, they were both abolished and replaced by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The LSC was given responsibility for both 'planning and commissioning' further education and training. The LSC 'commissioned' provision not just from FE colleges, but also from private and voluntary sector training organisations. And to help make sure that there could be no longer be any distinction between colleges and private trainers, FE students became 'learners' and colleges became 'providers'.

In 2010, a Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government was formed and shortly after it was the LSC's turn to come under the cosh. The LSC was criticised for its obsession with micro managing providers and for its 'gross mismanagement' of the FE colleges building programme. And so it was abolished and immediately replaced by two new organisations. One was the SFA, which assumed the LSC's responsibilities for funding full and part time provision for those aged 19+ and for apprentices aged 16-18 (through the NAS). The other was the Young Peoples' Learning Agency (YPLA) which assumed the LSC's responsibilities for funding provision for full time 16-18 year olds. Then, in 2012 for reasons that no one can seem to remember, the government abolished the YPLA but then immediately replaced it with the EFA. Clearly now on a bit of a roll, the government went on to abolish the 9 RDA's, but then immediately replaced them with 40 new Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP's).

Concerns have been expressed that the LEP's are starting to look and act like the old TEC's. To add to these worries, Lord Heseltine has called for the whole of the 19+ skills budget to be handed over to them. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne is believed to have given his support for this and BIS has announced that a government statement on the issue will be made as part of next month's budget speech. This has led to fears that the whole thing has now come full circle, and that the LEP's *will* become a reincarnation of the old TEC's, complete with their inefficiency, their lack of transparency, their 'grace and favour' approach to allocating funds, their mad schemes and their general inability to achieve anything of any real or lasting benefit to local economies.

FE colleges braced for more change

To prepare for the coming transition, the government has now entered into informal discussions with key stakeholders, including the AoC and the AELP. Both have expressed their opposition to the proposed transfer of funds to the LEP's, arguing that the LEP's will be no more sensitive to the learning and skills needs of local employers than are local FE colleges and private trainers. As might be expected, the AoC

has focused its concerns on how colleges would be funded by and through the LEP's. Lord Heseltine says that the 'single pot' to be controlled by the LEP's should *not* be ring-fenced. This has caused the AoC to express 'serious concerns' that if funds for further education and skills are not ring-fenced, there will be a 'lack of transparency' in how funds are spent. There are also fears that, for example, a LEP might decide to spend funds that were notionally intended for FE provision on infrastructure projects instead (such as an international convention centre or an indoor arena). Those who worked in further education colleges in Birmingham during the 1980's would no doubt be able to remember this kind of scenario and, just in case they've forgotten, Birmingham has been chosen to pilot the Heseltine proposals.

And finally.....

To demonstrate to Ofsted that he was serious about paying attention to the 'learner voice', a college principal conducted periodic 'question and answer' sessions with groups of students from across the college. At the end of one of these sessions, two students who had not previously met were having a cup of coffee in the college refectory.

The first student asked the second what he thought of the principal, to which he replied that he thought the principal was 'big headed', 'boring', and 'full of the sense of his own importance', before going on to say that he generally came across as being 'a bit of a nerd'.

'Do you know who I am?' said the first student angrily. 'No', said the second, 'Who are you?' to which the first student replied, 'I'm the principal's daughter'. 'Oh really', said the second student. 'And do *you* know who *I* am?' 'No, I don't', said the indignant girl, to which the boy replied, 'Well, thank goodness for that'.

Alan Birks – February 2013

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