

Sector Developments

Skills Minister says that the extent of FE cuts is 'misleading'

A report jointly commissioned by the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Sixth Form Colleges Association (SFCA), the Independent Academies Association (IAA), the Freedom and Autonomy for Schools Association (FASNA) and Principals' Professional Council (PPC), entitled *'16-19 Education Stripped to the Bare Bones'*, says that funding for post-16 education is, in real terms, just 58% of what it was when today's 17 year-olds were born.

Since 2010, the schools budget in England has been protected, with increases in capital funding for the creation of new Free Schools, Studio Schools, University Technical Colleges (UTCs) and Academies. Over the same period the HE budget has increased by 23%, mainly as a result of increased tuition fees paid up front on behalf of students by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Against this, the FE sector budget has been the subject of significant real term cuts, the latest of which is the reduction in the Adult Skills Budget (ASB) announced in the recent Skills Funding Statement (SFS). The ASB is to be cut by more than £463 million, or 19%, by 2016. Also funding for full-time 18 year old students will be subject to a significant real term cut in funding.

However, Skills Minister Matthew Hancock has rejected criticism of the cuts, and claims that it is 'misleading' to say that the ASB will be reduced 19% over the next two years (even though it will be). This, he said, is because the extent of the cut will be alleviated by an increase in the amount of funding being made available for 24+ Advanced Learning Loans, which is being increased from £129 million to £498 million. He argued that the cut in the ASB was therefore not really a cut, but more of 'a switch from one type of funding to another'. He went on to say that he was continuing to 'fight the corner of FE' and gave 'keeping hold of the loans budget', as an example of his success in doing so. Mr. Hancock also claimed that 16-19 funding for FE was fair, saying 'whether you are in a school sixth form, a sixth form college or an FE college, you are treated exactly the same, and the new funding formula is the same per pupil for every pupil, except for more support for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, more support for those with learning difficulties and more support for more expensive courses like vocational courses'.

New colleges to be created

In spite of the deep cuts being imposed on existing FE colleges, the government intends to 'support the establishment of new colleges that will provide high quality training and adopt innovative approaches to learning and drive up quality, customer focus and responsiveness'. In doing so, the government appears to be particularly keen to allow successful private providers to incorporate as FE colleges.

The first these is the Prospects Learning Foundation, an independent training provider based in South Essex that has established itself as a charity, already refers to itself as 'Prospects College', and that has now been given permission by BIS to incorporate as an FE college. Prospect College's chief executive, Neil Bates, claims that the incorporation proposal has received 'overwhelming support from employers, local authorities, members of parliament and prospective *students*', (interestingly, not *learners*). Ofsted graded Prospects College as 'good' at its last inspection, but Mr. Bates says that he hopes that the new college will become 'outstanding' within 3 years and will by then 'have more than 1,000 advanced and higher technician apprentices at the college, supporting key sectors of the economy'. Mr. Bates ambitiously went on to say that incorporation would 'unlock more government money' and would allow Prospects College to grow and to 'set up new bases' around the country.

Prospects College will apparently include a 'Railway Engineering Academy', the 'majority of funding' for which, Mr. Bates claims that 'is coming from major employers in the rail sector'. The government has recently unveiled separate proposals for another new FE college to meet the training needs associated with the new High Speed Rail project (HS2), but it is at present unclear how the new HS2 College would link to Prospect's Rail Engineering Academy.

Call for Freedom of Information legislation to be extended to private providers

The Freedom of Information (FoI) Act currently requires any government or publically funded organisation to respond to requests for information. However this does not currently apply to private firms that are awarded government contracts. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has recently published a report entitled '*Contracting out Public Services to the Private Sector*' that denounces the 'veil of secrecy' surrounding the contracts awarded to large companies like G4S, (which is currently graded by Ofsted as 'inadequate' in respect of its apprenticeship provision) and calls for FoI legislation to be extended to cover government contracts with all private providers, including private training providers, that deliver public services on the government's behalf.

In response to this call, Justice Minister Simon Hughes said 'We intend to publish a revised code of practice to make sure that private companies that carry out public functions have freedom of information requirements in their contracts'. If and when implemented, this would mean that all SFA and Education Funding Agency (EFA) contractors would be affected by the proposed changes (although it is currently unclear as to whether the change would apply to sub-contractors).

Data on Traineeship starts published

BIS has included data on Traineeship starts for the first time as part of the most recent 'Statistical First Release' (SFR). The data reveals that there were 3,300 Traineeship starts in the 6 months from August 2013 to January 2014. The former Ofsted Director for FE and Skills, Matthew Coffey previously described the take-up of traineeships as 'disappointing' and now, shadow education minister, Rushanara Ali, has also said that the figures were 'disappointing, particularly since there are currently 912,000 young people who are unemployed'. Against this, a BIS spokesperson said that the figures were 'a good start', but then gave a warning that 'the data may not be complete' because 'providers may not have reported all their information relating to this period' and that 'new reporting systems typically present issues in terms of completeness and accuracy'. Presumably to make the uncertain position on the actual number of Traineeship starts even more uncertain, the BIS spokesperson went on to say that an analysis of ILR data showed that there was 'more likely to be a significant undercount for traineeships compared to other provision' and added that it was apparently not possible to provide a breakdown by age, gender or provider because the data was 'likely to present unreliable and misleading comparisons'. All of which has resulted in some observers questioning why BIS had bothered to publish the data in the first place.

Problems with some local authority data on the employment status of 16 and 17 year olds

At the end of 2013, the numbers of 16 and 17 year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) increased by around 38,000. This was disappointing for the government since last September the compulsory participation age was raised to age 17 (and will rise further to age 18 this September). The increase in the NEET figures has prompted Skills Minister Matthew Hancock to write to 21 local authorities criticising them for 'inadequate recording of the employment status of 16 and 17 year olds'. The response of some of the councils affected includes blaming computer systems, or the social and geographical challenges specific to their area, such as a high rate of population 'churn'. Other councils said there 'had been problems in transferring the responsibility for collecting the data from the Connexions service', while a few acknowledged that there was a problem and said that they 'were working on it'.

Data on Apprenticeship starts published

The most recent SFR data also shows that over the period August 2013 to January 2014:

- The number of apprenticeship starts for those aged 25 and over decreased from 93,300 to 49,100 compared to the same period the previous year, (A BIS spokesperson attributed the dramatic reduction to the unpopular, and now abandoned, apprentice FE loans system).
- The number of apprenticeship starts for those aged 19-24 decreased from 82,000 to 76,000 compared to the same period the previous year.
- The number of under-19 apprenticeship starts *increased* from 69,600 to 71,700 compared to the same period the previous year.

Low take-up of 24+ Advanced Learning Loans

Recently published figures show that the take up of 24+ advanced learning loans in the first year of operation has resulted in a substantial under-spend in the budget. Just over 65,000 applications for loans have been received so far, against an initial government estimate of 85,000 being approved. Around 48% of the applications received were from prospective students wanting to take Level 3 programmes, of which 30% were from prospective students applying for Access to HE course. Advanced and Higher Level Apprenticeships had also been covered in the scheme, but were removed earlier this year after making up less than 0.7% of the total loan applications.

Apprentice funding proposals rejected

The results of the latest BIS consultation on apprenticeship funding reform have now been released. They reveal that the vast majority of provider and employer respondents *do not* support the government's proposed funding reforms.

Last November, Matthew Hancock announced that the government proposed to fund apprenticeships through the Pay As You Earn (PAYE system), whereby employers would claim funding for their apprentices through the tax system. This was just one of the options suggested in the earlier consultations on apprenticeship funding. However the government's preferred PAYE option was supported by just 29 out of 366 of respondents (which included businesses, providers and other stakeholders). Even where the option received the highest level of support, (which was amongst respondents from medium-sized business) less than one in four employers were in favour of it. The most popular option, receiving support from 213 of the 366 respondents was to retain the current system of channeling funding through providers. Commenting on this, Stewart Segal, the chief executive of the Association for Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), said that there was 'no overwhelming support from employers for the PAYE option' and that 'many smaller businesses have said they will not recruit apprentices if they have to manage the funding directly'. However, a BIS spokesperson said that the government's policy aim of giving employers more control over apprenticeship funding 'was unlikely to be achieved by simply adjusting the current system', and went on to say that BIS would be 'consulting further on employer-routed funding as part of a fundamental overhaul to make the new system as simple and user-friendly as possible for all employers'.

Government proposals for increased college accountability

16-19 year old students

The government's response to the recent '*16-19 Accountability Consultation*' includes a commitment to developing:

- 'A new focus on measuring the progress that students make'
- 'A sharper focus on English and mathematics, recognising the importance of these skills for progression to further and higher education and employment'.
- 'Provision of better information on school and college performance for parents and students'.

Adult students

The recently published Skills Funding Statement (SFS) sets out the government's intention to build a 'stronger focus on learner outcomes, including destinations, as well as on the achievement of qualifications, when measuring the success of adult provision'. The SFS suggests that future adult funding would be linked to a wider range of outcomes, although BIS declined to comment on how learner outcome data would be used in determining funding allocations. (The only funding currently linked to learner destinations is the SFA's 'job outcome payment'). The new measures will focus on the following three areas:

- Progression within learning
- Destinations (into further learning and employment)
- Earnings

First set of experimental data on these measures will be published in July 2014, and will show results for 2010/11 learners, with data for 2011/12 learners being published in November 2014. In the first instance, data will be made available on a 'for information' basis but, alongside the July publication, BIS says that it

'intends to consult on outcome-based measures of performance for all post-19 FE and skills' and how these measures 'will be used in the future' including the determination of funding allocations. Seemingly in support of this, the SFA has published a second version of its 'Guide to Data Collection Requirements for Individual Learner Records (ILR) for 2014/15'. This latest guidance includes a mandatory requirement to complete five new learner outcome fields. In the first instance, these will only be applicable to students on traineeships, students funded through the adult skills budget and students who were unemployed prior to enrolment. The five fields are:

- Outcome start date (e.g. when learners get a job after completing a course).
- Outcome type (e.g. whether the former learner is in paid employment or back in education).
- Outcome code (giving more detail on the type of learner outcome being recorded).
- Outcome end date (i.e. the date that the former student finished a learner outcome, e.g. a new job).
- Outcome collection date (i.e. the date the outcome data was collected from the learner).

BIS says that colleges are also expected to 'look outwards to their communities and feel accountable to them'. Presumably to make sure that they do so, BIS will be publishing a new 'Accountability Framework' that will help measure the extent that colleges are being responsive to local community needs.

Colleges will have to declare the proportion of their provision that is delivered on-line

The SFA has announced that from the start of the 2014/15 academic year, FE colleges will be required to specify the proportion of their courses that are delivered online. This information will be required to be included in their ILR returns. The requirement comes in the wake of the publication of a report from the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (FELTAG), which recommended that by 2015/16 10% of all publicly funded courses should be delivered online, rising to 50% by 2017/18. Commenting on the new requirements, an SFA spokesperson said that the government wanted to see 'more radical approaches to the use of available educational technologies in learning' and went on to say that the SFA had been tasked by BIS to 'look at how we can put in place appropriate funding mechanisms to better facilitate online learning'. Some observers have expressed concerns about the government's definition of what constitutes on-line learning (e.g. would the use of a You Tube video within a course be regarded as on-line learning?).

Skills minister says college governors should be more proactive and challenging

At a recent event organised for chairs of college governing bodies, Matthew Hancock said that they should 'hold their principal's feet to the fire', (whatever this means) and went on to say that chairs should take steps to ensure that their governing bodies:

- 'Take greater ownership of their college, driving the strategic direction forward and challenging the Principal and senior leadership team on the quality of teaching and learning and the institution's financial position'.
- 'Satisfy themselves that they have a complete picture of how the college is operating by triangulating the information they receive from the Principal with other sources of information, for example, the new Data Dashboard being produced by Ofsted, which is due to be published in the spring'.
- 'Undertake effective succession planning within the governing body; bringing in new and diverse skills and fresh thinking, with more business people on boards; people who are used to providing challenge and handling changing financial circumstances'.
- 'Support the clerk in ensuring that the Principal/senior leadership team are not exceeding their authority'.
- 'Conduct an annual professional appraisal of the principal, which examines and reports on their performance to date and sets clear SMART targets for the year to come'.
- 'Undertake regular and purposeful training and development'. (Mr Hancock expressed the view that the training currently available was 'not adequate' for the tasks that governors are expected to carry out).
- 'Not be reluctant to take the difficult decisions when there is evidence of poor performance'.

The wait for the launch of 'Chartered Status' continues

The new Institution for Further Education (not to be confused with the Institute for Learning, the FE Guild or the Education and Training Foundation) has been given responsibility by BIS for developing and launching the latest addition to the long list of FE quality kite marks. The new quality standard, entitled 'Chartered Status', was originally supposed to have been launched at the start of this year and questions have been asked about the reasons for the delay. In response, the chair of the Institution for Further Education, Lord Lingfield, has explained that royal permission is required before the Institution could start granting Chartered Status. He also went on to warn providers that the acquisition of Chartered Status would not be a 'swift process' and that 'many criteria would have to be fulfilled'.

Colleges that apply for, and are awarded, Chartered Status are likely to be required to pay subscription fees. Lord Lingfield has declined to say what level these fees might be set at, however there are suggestions that an amount of up to £10,000 is being considered. Some observers have questioned how Chartered Status might be aligned to Ofsted inspections, and the value added that Chartered Status would bring with it. Others have expressed concern that smaller providers might not consider it worthwhile applying for chartered status if subscription fees are set too high. Meanwhile, presumably as a clear statement of intent, the Institution for Further Education has taken out a lease on new offices in Victoria Street, Westminster, and has appointed a former senior civil servant, Ed Quilty, to be its chief executive.

England's 15 year olds are 'significantly above average' in problem-solving skills

The previously released Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) school tests that compare how well 15 year old pupils from different countries perform in mathematics, reading and science, proved to be disappointing for the government. Pupils from England who took the tests failed to make the top 20 ranking in any of these subjects. However, the results from the latest batch of PISA tests, that measure how pupils are able to apply their knowledge to solve problems, ranks pupils from England in 11th place internationally, and as the second highest in Europe, behind Finland. Rather than testing theoretical knowledge, the PISA problem-solving tests examined how well teenagers could use their knowledge in practical questions. For example, it presented pupils with a range of information about different types of train tickets and asked them to work out the cheapest price for a journey. Pupils from Singapore and South Korea were at the top of the PISA problem-solving rankings, but England's pupils' performance puts them above pupils from countries such as Germany, the USA and Sweden.

Minority ethnic pupils outperform white British and white English pupils

Against this, figures recently obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) show that, proportionately, the numbers of children classified as white British or white English gaining five A* to C grades at GCSE has fallen below the national average. The data shows that they are being 'significantly outperformed' at school by a wide range of ethnic minority groups, including Chinese, Sri Lankan, Nigerian, Bangladeshi, Ghanaian, Indian, Sierra Leonean and Vietnamese, all of which are, proportionately, gaining five A* to C grades at GCSE at a rate which is above the national average. This has prompted calls for additional support to be provided for white British and white English pupils who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and in particular for white working-class children who find themselves to be in a minority within classes in some schools.

New GCSE grading system introduced

Ofqual has launched a consultation on a new grading system that will rank pupil performance in GCSE's from a grade nine at the top down to a grade one at the bottom. The switch from in-course assessment and modules to examinations set at the end of two years was announced previously. The proposed changes in grades are intended to provide a much clearer distinction between pupils currently achieving A and A* grades. In last summer's GCSE exams, there were 6.8% of pupils who were graded at A*. The new highest grade would be awarded to only the top 3%, (or about 20,000 pupils). Under the new system, an A grade would equate to a grade seven and the current C grade, widely regarded as the pass level for GCSEs, would become a grade four.

The proposed changes will begin with mathematics, English language and English literature to be taught from September 2015, with the first GCSEs awarded under the new system in the summer 2017. Other subjects will follow, including history, geography and some science subjects. For the first time, there will also be a link between England's GCSE examination grades and the PISA test results in other countries. The proposed changes, when implemented, will mean that GCSEs in England will have a different grading system and structure from GCSEs in Wales and Northern Ireland, thereby increasing the differences between the different UK accreditation systems.

Revised GCE A level content introduced

A more 'rigorous and demanding' raft of GCE A Levels has been introduced. Subjects affected include art and design, business, computer science, economics, English literature, English language, history, biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, and sociology, and the revised content for these subjects will be phased in between September 2015 and September 2016. Science practicals will no longer count towards A Level grades, but will become a separate test. Ofqual says this change has become necessary because 'such assessed experiments have become a narrow and predictable process', with pupils' results being 'bunched around the top of the scale'. More emphasis will also be placed on mathematical skills in other subjects, such as physics, geography and economics. Examples of the revised content of A Level subjects to be taught from September 2015 include the following:

- Science: There will be at least 12 practical experiments in chemistry, biology and physics. But they will be assessed as a pass or fail separately from the A-level grade. More mathematical knowledge will be expected in physics.
- History: Topics will need to cover at least 200 years rather than 100 years as at present. There will also be a specific theme to be studied within a 100-year period.
- English literature: There will be an 'unseen text' to promote wider and more critical reading.
- Economics: Will include more mathematics and coverage of the role of central banks and financial regulation.
- Computer science: There will be more focus on programming, algorithms and problem solving.

Reform of Vocational Qualifications

The government's recent policy document entitled '*Getting the Job Done*' sets out the steps taken to reform vocational qualifications in full-time education, and the proposals for further reform. The document says that by November 2014 more than 6,500 qualifications 'not valued by employers', or that have 'very low usage', will no longer be eligible for public funding. The government claims that this will release nearly £200 million of funding that can be 'redirected towards more effective qualifications which deliver for learners and employers'. At the same time, Ofqual is reviewing the way that qualifications are approved and regulated, 'to make sure that the system consistently produces high quality qualifications, rather than ones that need to be removed from funding because they don't meet real needs'.

New 16-19 Level 3 Tech Levels and Applied General Qualifications announced

The first lists of Level 3 'Tech Levels' and 'Applied General Qualifications' for 16-19 year olds have also been published.

- 217 qualifications have now been approved as Tech Levels. Tech Levels will count towards the TechBacc that will be introduced for courses beginning in September 2014, and for reporting in the 16-19 performance tables. The government says that students who achieve the three component qualifications of a TechBacc (a Tech Level, alongside a Level 3 mathematics qualification and an 'extended project') 'will be equipped to apply for technician roles and higher apprenticeships in a wide range of industry sectors or could enter professional training or university'.
- 87 qualifications have now been approved as Applied General Qualifications. The government says that Applied General Qualifications 'provide broader study of a vocational area and (alone or combined with other qualifications) and fulfil the entry requirements to a range of HE courses'.

New legislation for students with special educational needs (SEN) in FE

The Children and Families Act has now received Royal Assent. From this September, the new legislation will introduce a new system of support for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) from age 0 to 25. Schools, FE colleges, sixth form colleges and approved independent specialist providers (ISPs) will all be required to comply with new legal duties, including a duty to 'have regard' to a new 0-25 SEN Code of Practice. Young people who would currently receive a Learning Difficulty Assessment (LDA) will, in future, have an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan. All post-16 provision will be included in a new local offer for SEN and disability services and providers will be under a legal duty to admit a student if named in a young person's EHC plan. FE colleges will be supported to further develop their capacity to deliver high quality provision for students with SEN through the new bursaries being made available for high-calibre graduates to undertake the specialist Diploma in Teaching Disabled Learners.

Statutory guidance issued on careers advice in schools

In 2012, the provision of independent advice and guidance (IAG), including careers advice, became the responsibility of schools. However it seems that many schools are failing to provide this and the matter has been the subject of an earlier House of Commons Education Select Committee report.

A recent AoC survey of 105 colleges about careers advice in schools showed that schools without sixth forms provided the best access for pupils to information about colleges, while those with sixth forms provided the worst access. The survey went on to reveal that:

- 74% of respondents thought that information, advice and guidance had worsened because schools wanted to keep the more academic students to benefit their performance tables.
- 69% of respondents said that schools only allowed college liaison officers to speak to certain students.
- 84% of respondents said that schools had declined offers of visits from college liaison staff.
- 76% of respondents said that schools had declined to take part in college taster days.
- 70% of respondents said that schools had failed to distribute college prospectuses.
- 55% of respondents said that schools had refused to display information about college courses.

However schools will now be legally obliged to inform their pupils about vocational study and apprenticeship options after the government published statutory guidelines on the provision of careers advice. By law, schools *must* offer their pupils 'independent, impartial careers advice including the full range of options available to learners, and prove they are doing so in the best interests of pupils'. The statutory guidance is specifically directed at school governing bodies. The document states that 'The statutory duty requires governing bodies to ensure that all registered pupils at the school are provided with independent careers guidance from year 8 (12 to 13-year-olds) to year 13 (17 to 18-year-olds)' and goes on to say 'The governing body *must* ensure that the independent careers guidance provided is presented in an impartial manner, includes information on the range of education or training options, including apprenticeships and other vocational pathways and that the person giving such advice and guidance will promote the best interests of the pupils to whom it is given'.

Sector organisations have generally welcomed the statutory requirement imposed on schools, however the AoC has expressed some concern that the new careers guidance rules are not sufficiently explicit about FE options and that 'more work needs to be done, especially regarding the steps that will be taken to ensure that schools comply with the guidance'.

Free meal guidelines issued by the EFA

From September this year, FE and sixth form colleges will receive £2.41 for every free meal served to a disadvantaged 16-18 year old student. The EFA has set out the legal duty that will be imposed on colleges to provide free meals and has outlined the financial help they will receive to set up schemes for payment, such as vouchers or card payment systems, as is currently the case in schools. In the 2014/15 academic year, initial allocations will be based on those students 'matched as being previous recipients of free school meals at the age of 15'. Subsequent funding adjustments will be made on a 'lagged student number basis'. Students who receive, or whose parents receive certain types of income support, including job-seeker's allowance (JSA) and employment and support allowance (ESA) will be eligible for free meals. Free meals

will also be available to whose parents are supported under part six of the Immigration and Asylum Act, those claiming child tax credit whose income is below £16,190 per year, those receiving working tax credit and, in some circumstances, those receiving universal credit.

Another Free School to be closed

The DfE has withdrawn funding from the Discovery New School in Crawley, West Sussex, after it failed to make the improvements required by Ofsted when it was inspected last May. The Discovery New School opened in 2011 and was one of the UK's first Free Schools. All of the school's pupils are believed to have been found places elsewhere. In February, it was announced that secondary education at the Al-Madinah Free School in Derby would cease this summer because of government concerns about its quality of teaching (and certain aspects of its management), although the primary school will remain open. In addition, Hull Studio School, which opened in September 2012, and has 'struggled' to attract enough students to make it viable, will close in August.

Claims of radical Islamist take-over of inner city schools

Anonymous claims that Muslim fundamentalists are taking over the running of some inner-city schools have been made. The allegations are supported by the contents of a copy of a letter that was sent to local authorities. The authenticity of the letter and its contents (referred to as the 'Trojan Horse' letter) has yet to be established, but officials have given it sufficient credence to initiate a series of investigations into the running of 25 schools in Birmingham. The letter was apparently written by someone in Birmingham and sent to a contact in Bradford, and is claimed to contain a plan showing how schools can be taken over and pushed into adopting a more radical Islamic culture. The letter also says that the plan has already been used to bring about leadership changes at several schools in Birmingham. The plan apparently involves a campaign of installing governors sympathetic to radical Islam and firstly undermining, and then replacing, school leaders with others who are also sympathetic to radical Islam. The letter says that parents can be encouraged to turn against the existing school leadership team if they are told that the school is 'corrupting their children with sex education, teaching about homosexuals, making their children pray Christian prayers and carrying out mixed swimming and sport' and goes on to set out the ways and means by which schools can be taken over. These include the following:

- Identifying 'target schools' based in Muslim areas.
- Selecting a group of 'Salafi' (fundamentalist) parents within the school community. (The letter says that they are the ones 'most committed to Islam').
- Invoking the help of these parents to install governors that will 'drip feed' ideas for a Muslim school.
- Identifying 'weak and disgruntled staff' and encouraging them to complain about the existing school leadership.
- Sending anonymous letters to local MPs, education authorities, councilors and others, complaining about the school leadership in order to get an external investigation launched.
- When the existing leadership is removed, Muslim governors will ensure that a new leadership more committed to radical Islam is appointed.

It has now emerged that Birmingham City Council, the Department for Education's Extremist Unit, the West Midlands Police Counter Terrorism Unit and the National Association of Head Teachers were already aware of the Trojan Horse letter, and since it was made public, a number of existing and former school staff have come forward to make additional allegations. A spokesperson for Birmingham City Council said that the Council 'had received more than 200 responses in relation to its inquiry' including one from a former head teacher who claimed that 'religiously-motivated, concerted attempts to force out heads had been taking place since the 1990s'. Allegations made include claims that boys and girls have been segregated in classrooms and assemblies, with girls being placed at the back, sex education being banned, extreme Islamist views being put forward by external speakers at assemblies, misuse of public funds, loud speakers being installed on school premises to call pupils to prayer, the appointment of new staff (including senior staff) by governors without reference to the head teacher, 'creationism' being taught as fact in science classes, non-Muslim staff being bullied, girls being pressured to wear the hijab and 'the creation of a culture in which other religions are downgraded'. The City Council has now announced a freeze on the recruitment of all LEA controlled school governors while it investigates the claims and the 10 local MPs have asked for

the Council and DfE to jointly review the allegations.

As a result, there are now 4 separate investigations taking place in parallel to each other, as follows:

- Birmingham City Council has appointed Iain Kershaw, a former head teacher to head the Council's investigation into the local authority controlled schools involved.
- Michael Gove has appointed former counter-terror chief Peter Clarke to oversee the DfE investigation into academies and free schools involved, and wider allegations of extremism.
- Ofsted inspections are being carried out at 18 of the schools in question in the first instance, and are personally being overseen by the Chief Inspector for England, Sir Michael Wilshaw.
- The Education Funding Agency has appointed a specialist team to examine allegations of financial irregularity.

Investigation reports are expected to begin to trickle through in May, with a final report containing comprehensive findings and recommendations scheduled for publication in July.

A governor at one of the schools implicated in the letter has repeatedly described the allegations as 'a hoax' and that his school was facing a 'witch hunt' based on 'all sorts of false allegations'. Some Muslim parents have complained that the freeze on the recruitment of school governors was effectively a message 'that Muslim governors were not welcome'. Douglas Morgan, a teacher from Birmingham, warned the NUT conference in Birmingham that the inquiries could 'demonise the Muslim population of this country' and called on the NUT 'to send a message that we are against Islamophobia'. However, a spokesperson for the DfE said the allegations were 'very serious' and that it was vital that investigations were 'carried out impartially'. Shadow Education Minister Tristram Hunt agreed with the DfE position and, in response to what he described as 'allegations of infiltration, intimidation and the pursuit of a divisive religious extremism' said 'We cannot have narrow, religious motives dictating state schooling, we cannot have head teachers forced out, teachers undermined, curricula re-written, and cultural or gender-based segregation'.

Universities Minister calls for more provision in HE 'cold spots'

In the wake of the decision to lift off the cap on higher education student numbers from 2015/16, Universities minister, David Willetts has given the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the SFA, FE colleges and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) until the autumn to identify 'cold spots' across the country where there is a lack of higher education provision', and to draw up proposals for 'coherent tertiary offers in areas where there is unmet demand'. Mr. Willetts said 'I want HEFCE to work with universities, FE colleges and LEPs to develop plans for university campuses where they are most needed' and added 'our message is clear, if this is your town's dream, we want you to pursue it'. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimates that lifting of the HE student numbers cap will result in around 60,000 additional HE students per year at an extra up-front cost to the tax payer of £1.7 billion per year.

More HE students in FE

A recent HEFCE survey shows that the number of students starting degree courses at further education colleges in England in 2013/14 was around 10,000 higher than it was in 2010/11, a 57% increase. However, the report also shows that over the same period, the number starting degree courses at universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) fell by around 16,000.

Graduates 'will still be paying off loans into their 50s'

The Sutton Trust has commissioned a study to assess the impact of the new student loan system for fees and maintenance and the higher tuition fees, introduced in England in September 2012. The study, which was conducted by the IFS, and is entitled '*Payback Time*', concludes that a typical student starting a course in 2012 will leave university with debts averaging more than £44,000. The majority of this debt is attributed to the higher loans taken out to cover the higher tuition fees charged. Also, as a result of the government's decision to charge interest on loans at a rate that is higher than the rate of inflation, it is estimated that graduates will, in total, eventually repay an average of £66,897, with the lowest-earning graduates (those whose salaries remain below £21,000) paying back less, and those who earn higher salaries paying back substantially more. The study report goes on to say that many graduates 'will still be paying back their

loans when they are in their 50s', and cites the example of an 'average teacher', who takes out an average level of loan, who works every year after graduating and has average earnings for the profession. The report says although this 'average teacher' would have around £25,000 of their loan written off, they would still repay a total £42,000 at 2014 prices and would not finish paying back their loan until they are in their early 50s. The report goes on to say that this 'average teacher' would need to find £2,500 extra a year 'to service loans at a time when their children are still at school, and family and mortgage costs are at their most pressing'.

Meanwhile, research conducted on behalf of the 'Complete University Guide' has revealed that earnings for graduates fell by an average of 11% in real terms between 2007 and 2012 and that this decline 'is continuing and perhaps increasing'. The IFS is currently predicting that 43% of loan funding will never be recovered (with some analysts predicting that up to 70% of loans may need to be written off) leading to concerns that the new HE fee and loans system will cost the taxpayer more than the previous system did.

More students from England considering degree studies abroad

Meanwhile, a recent British Council survey of 2,500 prospective undergraduates in England has revealed that 37% (compared to 20% last year) are considering undertaking their degree studies abroad, with lower tuition fees abroad being the main reason given. Meanwhile, the proportion of all post-graduate students at UK universities who actually come from the UK has fallen to 26%. (Against this, the proportion of all post-graduate students at UK universities who come from China has increased to 23%).

One in ten degrees claimed by graduates contain 'errors'

Higher Education Degree Datacheck (HEDD) is an agency set up two years ago by the HEFCE to verify the degree subjects and grades claimed by graduates applying for jobs or places on university post graduate programmes. On the basis of checks they have carried out thus far, HEDD says that almost one in ten degrees that applicants claim to have, contained 'errors' such as the wrong degree classification, or the wrong subject. A spokesperson for HEDD said that 'some errors could be honest mistakes' but went on to say that there was often 'clear evidence of fraud'. The spokesperson said that they also frequently 'see degree certificates from bogus universities' and went on to warn that there are likely to be many more cases of 'error' that are going 'unnoticed or undetected'. The most common type of 'mistake' seen by HEDD was when an applicant claimed that they had a higher graded degree than the one they were actually awarded. HEDD says that the applicants who were caught out usually said that they wanted 'to stand out from competitors in the jobs market'.

Changes at the top at Ofsted

Lorna Fitzjohn HMI has been appointed as Ofsted's director of further education and skills, replacing Matthew Coffey HMI, who will become Ofsted's chief operating officer.

Changes at the top at the Institute for Learning (IfL)

Toni Fazaeli has announced her retirement as chief executive of the IfL. Her successor will be Dr Jean Kelly, who is currently the IfL director of professional development. Ms Fazaeli will however maintain her involvement with FE as chair of governors of an FE college and a member of the Skills Commission.

And finally...

Michael Gove, Tristram Hunt and David Laws were having a working lunch in one of the heavily subsidised members' only restaurants in the House of Commons. They were discussing the development of a cross party strategy for improving what they considered to be the poor standard of numeracy in schools and colleges in England. At the end of the meal the waiter brought them the bill, which came to £25. They each paid a £10 note, making £30 in total. The waiter took the notes and brought back £5 in pound coins as change. They each took one of the £1 coins and gave the waiter the remaining £2 as a tip. This means that they each paid £9 (£10 less the £1 they took back in change), making a total of £27. The waiter was given £2, making £29 in total. All three of them then spent the rest of the afternoon locked in their offices with their advisors, trying to work out what happened to the remaining £1.

Alan Birks – April 2014

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