

Sector Developments

More cuts on the way for FE

A recent article in the Financial Times (FT) has warned that it is likely that another £48 billion will be cut from government department budgets over the lifetime of the next parliament, and goes on to say that this will be the case irrespective of which political party forms the next government. The current spending review period comes to an end in April 2016 and the FT article says that the Treasury has asked departmental permanent secretaries to begin to identify further cuts for the 2016/17 and 2017/18 financial years. Although it was already known that further substantial spending cuts would be called for as part of the deficit reduction programme, it was not known that the Treasury was already in the process of asking government departments for their proposals for making further cuts.

It is expected that the burden of the reduction to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) budget will, once again, be borne by the FE sector in England. This was confirmed at the recent AoC Annual Conference, when BIS minister Vince Cable warned that further significant cuts to FE budgets were on their way. Many are now saying colleges will not be able to cope with further cuts because 'there are simply no more efficiency savings to be had'. They go on to warn that if further cuts go ahead, the skills and training opportunities of a generation of young people will be irreparably damaged. They also argue that, as has been the consequence of the continuous cuts to NHS training places over the years, employers will increasingly have no alternative but to seek to recruit their skilled staff from abroad.

Demanding that the FE sector bears the brunt of further cuts in education spending is grossly unfair when compared to the protection given by the government to the schools budget, along with the £ billions of public money spent on new Academies, Free Schools, University Technical Colleges (UTCs), and Studio Schools. With reference to post-16 provision alone, since 2011, the government has established and funded 138 new school and academy sixth forms. Also, between 2010 and 2013 the government spent £62 million just on nine new 16-19 new Free Schools that will cater for just 1557 students (assuming that these recruitment targets can actually be achieved).

It is also hard to reconcile the huge cuts to FE budgets with the exponential increases in funding that English universities have received as a result of the increase in tuition fees, paid up-front to the universities by BIS (in the dwindling hope of eventually recovering this expenditure from students when they eventually obtain a job). University funding will increase still further when HE recruitment caps are lifted next year.

A bit like a playground bully, it appears that the government thinks that FE is a soft target for more cuts in the future. This is probably because there has been no effective opposition to the cuts imposed on the sector in the past. (More on this later).

The AoC Manifesto

Many argue that the very existence of the FE sector is now under threat. You might therefore be forgiven for thinking that perhaps this should have been the main focus for discussion at the recent AoC Conference. You might go on to think that the event would have provided the ideal opportunity for ascertaining the extent to which colleges were prepared to collectively fight against cuts, and if so, for developing the strategies for doing so. Instead, amongst other things, the AoC used the conference as the platform to launch its 10-point manifesto setting out the key issues that the AoC feels the next government might perhaps like to take note of. These include:

- Providing better careers education and advice
- Providing education accounts for students aged over 19
- Providing affordable and accessible student transport
- Creating a higher technical and professional education system fit for the 21st century
- Preparing young people for apprenticeships
- Introducing assessment methods which reflect real life
- Allowing colleges continued autonomy to respond to local needs
- Meeting the English and mathematics challenge
- Arguing for funding that matches student need
- Spending scarce resources sensibly

Full details of the manifesto can be found on the AoC website

Sixth Form Colleges' Association (SFCA) Manifesto

The SFCA has also launched a manifesto setting out the key issues affecting sixth form colleges that it would like the next government to take on board. These include requests for:

- A new national funding formula based on the actual cost (and in the meantime, maintaining sixth form funding at least at 2013/14 levels)
- Transferring responsibility for funding high-needs students back to the EFA
- A competitive process for establishing new sixth form providers that is open to all types of sixth form providers. (Currently, only a school, academy or free school sixth form can be created to meet demand for new sixth form provision).
- Exemption from VAT (which the SFCA refers to as a 'tax on learning') on the same basis as school sixth forms

Full details of the manifesto can be found on the SFCA website

Slump in the number of adults participating in FE in England

From September 2013, those aged 24+ wishing to take Level 3 courses (and above) have been required to fund their education and training through loans made available through the Student Loans Company (SLC). No doubt coincidentally, figures recently published by BIS show that the number of people aged 24+ participating in FE in England fell by 27.9% between 2012/13 and 2013/14, and that the numbers of people aged 24+ on Level 4 courses were particularly badly hit with 34.2% fewer students in 2013/14 than in 2012/13. The government had also hoped that more than 25,000 people aged 24+ would rush to borrow around £4,000 to pay for their apprenticeships. In fact, as at the end of November 2013 (3 months after the loans were introduced), apprenticeship loans had been taken up by just 404 people. As a result BIS decided to remove apprenticeships from the loans programme, on the basis that 'it had become clear that loans were not the preferred route for employers or prospective apprentices'.

FE loans system in England likely to be extended

Despite this, the FE sector is currently awaiting the results of a BIS consultation on proposals for extending the current FE loans system to 19-23 year olds. BIS has not published the results of the consultation yet, however, Skills and Equalities minister Nick Boles gave a strong indication that the loans system in England *will* be extended to 19-23 year olds, when he told the House of Lords Digital Skills Committee that the government was 'moving towards making adult learner loans more widely available'. Mr. Boles explained to the committee that the government 'was simply not in a position where taxpayers can fund people to go on doing courses throughout their working life'. Mr. Boles did, however, acknowledge that the inclusion of 24+ apprenticeships in the English FE loan scheme had been a 'bad idea'.

More adult qualifications axed

The Whitehead Report, published in November 2013, called for 95% of the then 19,000-plus adult qualifications eligible for public funding to be discontinued, and the SFA was subsequently tasked with delivering this reduction. Last year's SFA annual review of qualifications resulted in the funding for 1,601 qualifications being discontinued and, in the wake this year's SFA review, public funding for a further 691 adult qualifications will also be withdrawn (with funding for an additional 972 qualifications being placed at risk). Those awarding bodies that want to make the case to retain public funding for their qualifications have until December 4 to do so.

Proposed re-launch of Functional Skills

Nick Boles is currently considering a major re-launch of Functional Skills qualifications. An indication of his intent to do this was given in a letter he sent to Ofqual chief executive, Glenys Stacey last month (October), in which he said Functional Skills 'would continue to be one of the types of qualification that learners have available'. His letter went on to ask for Ms. Stacey's advice on how best to 're-brand' them. Ms. Stacey responded by saying she welcomed the minister's 'clear statement about the importance you attach to Functional Skills qualifications'. However, she was cautious in her response to Mr. Boles' plans to rebrand the qualifications, saying 'It takes some years for qualification titles to become understood and trusted, particularly by employers and others who are not close to the education system'. Ms. Stacey also said that Ofqual's recent review of Functional Skills had found 'some of them wanting, but capable of improvement'. (Just for information, Functional Skills should not be confused with Basic Skills, Key Skills, Core Skills,

Essential Skills, Life Skills or Skills for Living, even though they might all sound a bit similar).

GCSE English and mathematics re-sit requirement to be reviewed

Mr. Boles has also announced that the government is reviewing its policy of requiring all post-16 students who failed to get a C grade in GCSE English or mathematics to retake the qualification. Mr. Boles said he had 'listened intently' to concerns about the way the government is implementing the new requirement. He also announced that the re-sit requirement would be waived completely for students on courses of less than 150 hours duration. He went on to say that he had commissioned the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) 'to review the best way to accredit mathematics and English skills' and that this would involve the ETF 'working with employers, colleges and awarding bodies to develop qualifications for those unable to pass the GCSE'. However, Mr. Boles warned that any alternative qualification must not be seen as a 'soft option'. A spokesperson for the ETF said 'there are other ways for people to improve their English and mathematics skills', adding that 'learners and employees following these routes deserve the very best provision that leads to a qualification employers recognise and respect'. Against this, the spokesperson confirmed that the GCSE at grade C will 'still be regarded the central qualification in mathematics and English, and that more people must be supported to achieve it'. The ETF aims to produce 'preliminary recommendations' by Spring 2015.

Shadow Education Secretary for England calls for a new Level 2 qualification in mathematics

The shadow education secretary for England, Tristram Hunt (son of Julian, Baron Hunt of Chesterton, just in case you were getting him confused with another Tristram Hunt) has called for the establishment of a new Level 2 core mathematics qualification. Dr. Hunt said that the new qualification would still be equivalent to a GCSE grade A*-C, but its availability as an alternative would mean that students who have struggled with the subject would not have to retake the GCSE. He went on to say 'The notion of getting students to re-sit and re-sit and re-sit GCSEs which they haven't succeeded in, or plough endless amounts of effort into the C-D borderline, doesn't seem right to us'.

Meanwhile, Dr. Hunt has also proposed that the charitable status of the top public schools (such as the one he himself attended) could be called into question unless they voluntarily offer help to struggling state sector schools, attended by poorer children.

Government plans for employer cash contributions towards apprenticeships may not go ahead

BIS secretary, Vince Cable has admitted that, although the decision had not yet been made, it was unlikely that controversial government plans to ask employers for cash contributions of up to one third towards the cost of their apprenticeships would go ahead as currently proposed. Dr. Cable said 'we have been listening to the criticisms from small companies about not having more bureaucracy and obviously we want to have an arrangement that creates more apprenticeships rather than less, so we are having a fresh look at the whole issue'.

14-16 Apprenticeships may be resurrected

The young apprenticeship scheme involved 14-16 year olds spending two days a week in the workplace, along with the study of mathematics, English and vocational subjects. The scheme was discontinued in 2010 because the programme apparently cost £3,000 more than if pupils had remained in school. However proponents of the scheme have argued that capping the cohort to 9,000 pupils meant that economies of scale could not be achieved. Dominic Raab MP, who is a member of the Education Select Committee, attempted to introduce a bill to reintroduce 14-16 apprenticeships last year, but it failed to pass through the required stages before the end of the parliamentary session and was therefore abandoned. However, members of the House of Commons Education Select Committee have now agreed to add their support to calls for the scheme to be re-introduced.

Apprenticeships leading to a full honours degree to be introduced

150 new Apprenticeships leading to degrees will be offered in England from next September. Initially, the new apprenticeship programmes will be in information technology and software development, but will be expanded to include more subjects and involve other industries in subsequent years. The aim is to integrate academic learning at degree level with on-the-job practical training. The government will pay two-thirds of the apprenticeship costs and fees, while the employer will pay apprentices' wages and other costs. Employers of any size can take part in the scheme but the employers currently involved include Accenture,

BT, Capgemini, Ford, Fujitsu, GlaxoSmithKline, HM Revenue and Customs, Hewlett Packard, IBM, John Lewis, Lloyds Banking Group, Network Rail and Tata Consulting Services. Universities involved in the scheme include Aston, Exeter, Greenwich, Loughborough, Manchester Metropolitan, University College London and the University of the West of England.

Total number of apprenticeship starts continues to fall

Figures recently published by BIS on the numbers of apprenticeship starts show that:

- There were 440,000 all-age apprenticeship starts in 2013/14, compared with 510,200 in 2012/13 (a contraction of 13.7%), and 520,600 in 2011/12.
- Within the reduction shown in the 2013/14 figures, 19-24 apprenticeship starts fell from 165,400 to 159,100 (a contraction of 3.8%)
- Apprenticeship starts for those aged 25+ fell from 230,300 in 2013/14 to 161,600 in 2012/13 (a contraction of 29.8%).
- Against this, the number of 16-18 apprenticeship starts continued to recover and rose to 119,800 in 2013/14 compared to 114,500 in 2012/13 (an increase of 4.6%). This is the first annual increase for the age group in two years.

Traineeships to be 'opened up to more young people'

Nick Boles has announced that the government's flagship traineeship programme will be opened up to more young people as part of the government's effort to tackle youth unemployment. Traineeships are designed to give low-skilled young people the skills, experience and confidence to help them into apprenticeships or work. More than 10,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 have undertaken a traineeship programme since they were introduced in August 2013.

The proposed changes follow an earlier joint DfE and BIS consultation on 'ways to ensure traineeships deliver the best results for young people'. Positive responses were received from a wide range of organisations involved in delivering the programme, including training providers, students and employers. Respondents overwhelmingly supported wider eligibility for traineeships, backed changes to improve data on trainees' outcomes and welcomed the 'more consistent approach to funding for 16-24 year olds'.

Concerns expressed about the increased workload of joint EFA/SFA funding supremo

The chief executive of Education Funding Agency (EFA), Peter Lauener, has recently added the role of the chief executive of the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) to his existing duties. The EFA employs around 950 staff and manages an annual budget of around £54 billion of funding, whereas the SFA employs around 925 staff and manages an annual budget of around £4 billion. However, concerns are increasingly being expressed about the operational efficiency of this joint arrangement, with Tristram Hunt saying 'The National Audit Office (NAO) has warned about the EFA becoming overloaded, yet the government responds by appointing its chief executive as the joint chief executive of the SFA as well as the EFA'. A spokesperson for the DfE confirmed that Mr. Lauener would not receive a pay rise for his new role (so the arrangement would be less expensive) and went on to say that he 'was assisted by a strong team of directors who will take day-to-day responsibility of the EFA's functions'. The SFA declined to comment.

Rise in the participation age is not being enforced

Since September 2013, it has been a legal requirement for young people to remain in education, employment or training until the end of the year in which they turn 17. The age of participation will rise again to 18 in September 2015. Within the law that brought about the change, the government was given the power to fine employers that take on 16 and 17 year olds without providing them with training, but has thus far declined to do so. (The government can also technically take action against young people and their parents who fail to comply with the legislation). This has resulted in the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) seeking answers from the DfE as to why enforcement of the legislation is not taking place. In reply, a DfE spokesperson said 'we wanted the focus of activity in this area to be voluntary because we would rather people participated by choice, rather than by enforcement'. PAC chair Margaret Hodge, citing evidence from a recent National Audit Office (NAO) report that showed the policy was yielding favourable results, accused the DfE of choosing 'not to enforce what appears to us to be the most effective bit' of the policy.

AELP claims that independent training providers out perform colleges in inspections

An analysis carried out by the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), argues that independent training providers (ITPs) are outperforming FE colleges and employer providers in Ofsted inspections. The AELP analysis suggests that in 2013/14:

- 65% of ITPs gained grades 1 (outstanding) or 2 (good) compared to 61% of FE colleges, and 40% of employer providers. (Although FE colleges outperformed ITPs in the top grade, with 6% rated as outstanding compared to 2% of ITPs).
- In teaching and learning 68% of ITPs gained grades 1 and 2 compared to 62% of FE colleges and 47% of employer providers.
- In apprenticeships, 63% of ITPs gaining grades 1 or 2 for overall effectiveness, while for colleges it was 55% and for employer providers it was 40%.

Gibberish at the CBI conference

The prime minister, David Cameron gave a speech at the recent Confederation of British Industry (CBI) conference that some cynical observers have suggested contained disjointed syntax and was just a tad repetitive with the words 'think' and 'thinking'. In his speech, Mr. Cameron told business leaders that 'The idea that you go to school, go to college, get a degree and stop learning and start working, is old thinking. From now on, everyone is going to be thinking of how to continuously increase your skills through your life. That is why I think some of these apprenticeship programmes are so exciting, and I think we need schools and some teachers to change their opinions about them, because a lot of apprenticeship programmes now are about earning and learning, including all the way up to, and beyond, degree level. I think encouraging that through our workforce is going to be absolutely vital'.

Labour leader Ed Miliband also spoke at the CBI conference, and presumably in the attempt to emulate Mr. Cameron's somewhat unusual vernacular, Mr. Miliband told delegates 'if we win the election, our focus will be on a revolution in vocational education and apprenticeships. Again, this is an agenda where we have learned so much from you, as I say, from the CBI. It's about new gold-standard technical qualifications in schools, so 14 year olds know what they're aiming at. It's about proper work experience and careers advice for all our young people. It's about university expansion through technical degrees designed by businesses like yours, and it's also about giving you for the first time a real opportunity to decide how the public money for training is spent'.

No doubt not wanting to be left out (again), the deputy prime minister Nick Clegg also adopted a somewhat eccentric linguistic style when he told the audience 'One of the mistakes we made as a government was that we got rid of the Connexions service, for good reason, because it simply wasn't doing what it was supposed to. But then, candidly, there was quite a long debate, which is a polite way of putting it, in government about exactly what we'd do next. There were some voices in government which didn't want to do anything next, wanted it to be left to the market so to speak, and people like myself said, of course government has a role in setting a direction for what quality careers advice and guidance looks like'.

Some slightly bewildered delegates were alleged to have left the conference wondering what on earth the party leaders were talking about. More seriously, although the meaning of some of the party leaders' speeches may have been a little vague, it was crystal clear that none of them had any intention of reversing the massive cuts to FE budgets.

The CBI publishes a report

Meanwhile, the CBI used the conference to launch the publication of its latest report, called 'A better off Britain: Improving lives and making growth work for everyone'. Introducing the report, John Cridland, the director general of the CBI, said, 'We need to refocus the system, and refocus the recognition and reward in the system, so that the colleges who are boldest in making sure their provision is specialised and is fit for purpose are the ones who are rewarded'. Mr. Cridland went on to say, 'We've got to get a lot cuter in making sure we are delivering skills in quite a specialised way' and added that he wanted 'to see a skills landscape where every college becomes different rather than every college being homogenous'. Roughly translated, it appears that Mr. Cridland was, like Sir Andrew Foster before him, calling on colleges to become more specialised.

The Education Foundation publishes a report

The think tank 'The Education Foundation' (not to be confused with FELTAG, NILTA, JISC etc.) has published a report entitled 'Digital Colleges: The journey so far'. The report examines 'digital best practice in the college sector' and 'what a digital future would look like'. The report calls for FE leaders to 'move past the bright lights of tech and move towards creating digital colleges, embracing a mindset that utilises digital technology and engagement across the whole organisation'. The report also calls for 'a set of clear sector-wide owned definitions of a Digital College and understandings, shared and agreed by principals and senior leaders'. The report says that for a college to use technology more effectively there must be 'leadership from the front by principals, and good infrastructure where technology interacts and integrates well'. Colleges should also aim to become 'digital by default'.

UKCES publishes a report

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) has published a report entitled 'Growth Through People'. The report outlines a plan to increase workforce skills and 'action priorities for the next two decades', which, UKCES says 'must be achieved to boost productivity, wages and social mobility'. The report (which appears to be surprisingly clear when compared to the previous two above) says that:

- Current arrangements 'provide centrally driven incentives for education providers to produce high volumes of easy to deliver qualifications'. This 'offers no incentive to collaborate with employers or other educational institutions to deliver the skills that people and businesses really need.'
- Measuring and rewarding educational attainment via qualifications alone is no longer good enough' and success needs to be 'measured by a wider set of outcomes not just educational attainment' (such as the learner gaining employment or an employed learner gaining a pay rise).
- Employers should take the lead on improving skills. 'Governments should commit to supporting employer leadership on skills, individually and in partnerships, as a central part of long-term growth plans and a way of aligning public and private resources'.
- Increased workplace productivity should be recognised as 'the key route to increasing pay and productivity'. 'Equipping people with the right skills and giving them the best opportunities to use them will lead to better paid jobs.'
- Greater focus should be placed on 'opportunities to earn and learn', with a 'step change in attitude and uptake of quality vocational routes into good jobs'.
- 'High quality apprenticeships should be the normal career pathway for many more young people, and the normal way for businesses to recruit and develop their talent pipeline'.
- 'Employers, working collaboratively, should have the lead role in designing apprenticeships to ensure they have value in the labour market. The public contribution should be channeled via employers to stimulate greater employer uptake'.
- There should be 'closer links between work and education to ensure people are prepared for the workplace'.

Local Government Association (LGA) calls for an independent review of Ofsted

At its recent conference in Manchester, the LGA called for a review of Ofsted because 'U-turns and leaks had thrown its independence into question'. As an example of this, the LGA referred to Ofsted's re-inspection of five of the 'Trojan Horse' schools in Birmingham, which resulted in them being downgraded from 'good' or 'outstanding' to 'inadequate', in some cases in less than a year. But Sir Michael Wilshaw launched into a 'stinging rebuttal' of criticisms from council leaders, pointing out that Ofsted was always 'unlikely to win any popularity contests' (which, if nothing else, is an accurate self assessment). He went on to say that Ofsted 'would always adapt to higher expectations' and challenged his audience of councillors and local authority leaders on 'whether they could say the same'. With specific reference to the Trojan horse schools, Sir Michael said that 'those who would question why outstanding schools in Birmingham could so quickly decline to inadequate have very little understanding of how things can go so badly wrong, when sudden changes in leadership trigger a set of events that lead to failure'. He went on to remind council leaders that 'head teachers who had spent their careers improving schools in Birmingham had been intimidated and marginalised out of their jobs, but had received little or no support from the local authority'.

Sir Michael also said that councils needed to recognise that they were often seen 'as obstacles to change and improvement'. He told council leaders that there were 'those who would say that you have spent too much time over the years conceding to vested interests over the interests of children and young people in

our schools'. He went on to say that they were often regarded 'as leaders who are far too content to preside over status quo and mediocrity'. He added that 'there were those who would argue that, academies and free schools would not exist if successive governments had seen you as the solution, and not the problem'.

Birmingham City Council's failure to respond to Trojan Horse findings is 'astonishing' says Ofsted

Meanwhile, Sir Michael has called for 'greater urgency' from both Birmingham City Council and the DfE in addressing the issues raised in the Trojan horse scandal (in which radical Muslim groups were accused of trying to take control of a number of Birmingham schools in order to introduce a hard line Islamist curriculum) and described the lack of action by Birmingham City Council as 'astonishing'. Speaking to the PAC, Sir Michael said 'I don't think we've seen the end of the Trojan horse issues' and went on to say 'These are very, very serious issues'. Sir Michael also said the DfE had to increase its efforts to 'make sure new leaders at the affected schools were doing a good job. A spokesperson for the DfE, said Sir Michael 'was right to call for urgency', but said there were a number of things that needed to be done that 'unfortunately do take quite a bit of time, particularly around staffing changes'.

Ofsted says pupils at Muslim private schools in East London are at risk of radicalisation.

Following a series of emergency inspections, Ofsted inspectors say that six Muslim faith schools 'focused too heavily on Islamic teachings' and failed to 'prepare children for life in modern Britain'. As a result they were 'exposed to the risk of extremist views and radicalisation'. Education Secretary for England, Nicky Morgan said the DfE had 'asked Ofsted to carry out these independent school inspections' and that she regarded the findings as being 'very concerning'. She went on to say that she 'was not convinced that current managers were capable of making necessary improvements' and warned that 'the schools will be closed down if changes are not made quickly'. Ofsted inspection findings included the following:

- Some pupils did not know that there was a difference between Sharia Law and British law.
- At all of the schools, pupils' understanding of the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance, was underdeveloped
- Curriculum in some schools 'focused solely on Islamic themes'.
- Schools were not teaching enough about other faiths and cultures.
- Religious communities had enforced their own cultural values and traditions on children.
- Pupils in some schools believed it was wrong to learn about other religions, and were not taught art, music or drama
- Some pupils had 'narrow view' of women in society (e.g. some pupils told inspectors 'women should stay at home and clean and look after the children, they should cook and pray and wait for us to come back from school with our homework'.
- In one school, most of the school library books were in Arabic
- In another school the majority of lessons focused on Islamic or Arabic studies.
- In all of the schools pupils were expected to learn to recite religious texts by memory and repetition

All six schools were judged to be 'inadequate'

England's HE funding system is the 'worst of both worlds'

The Higher Education Commission (HEC, not to be confused with HEFCE) has produced a report that has cast doubt on the long-term financial sustainability of the current fees and loans system used in the English HE sector, which it describes as being the 'worst of both worlds'. The report warns that students are paying more, but the government is still writing off excessively high levels of student debt. The report also says that, for example, graduate 'middle earners', such as teachers, will be unlikely to pay back their student loans within the 30-year repayment period. The study goes on to suggest a range of possible alternative measures. These include the following:

- Lowering tuition fees to £6,000 would reduce student debt (but this would leave an estimated £1.7 billion funding gap for universities)
- Introducing a graduate tax (but this would require the government to borrow £4 billion to fill the gap between ending fees and the arrival of tax revenues)
- Removing the £9,000 upper limit on fees would allow more money for universities and increase competition, (but higher fees would mean even higher levels of public subsidy for loans)
- Introducing different charges for different universities or courses (but this could reduce the number graduates studying expensive courses with high fees, even if they were essential for the economy).

A spokesperson for BIS said the government would 'look closely at the findings from the commission' and went on to say that 'The UK enjoys a world-renowned reputation for the quality of its universities, which we have protected and enhanced through our reforms'. The report did not recommend adopting the HE tuition fee policy of the Scottish Government

Call for 'an urgent review' of the HE student finance system in England is rejected.

Following on from the HEC report above, the House of Commons BIS Select Committee has concluded that a 'tipping point' is fast approaching in respect of the current loan system's financial viability and that 'the proportion of graduates failing to pay back student loans is increasing at such a rate that the Treasury is approaching the point at which it will get zero financial reward from the government's policy of tripling university tuition fees to £9,000 a year'. The Select Committee has therefore called for 'an urgent review of the system's sustainability', and says it is 'alarming this has been refused'. Meanwhile, the government insists there is 'no immediate pressure' on the system and a government spokesperson has confirmed that there are 'no current plans to initiate a formal review of the sustainability of the student loans system in England'. The BIS Select Committee chairman Adrian Bailey MP responded to this by pointing out that the government's own figures predict that outstanding student debts will increase to more than £330 billion by 2044. Mr. Bailey went on to say that a review 'would offer the opportunity to assess the viability of the existing system before we stumble blindly into an unfunded student loans model which would leave students, universities, and taxpayers with a very raw deal indeed'.

HE students from poorer homes are more likely to drop out and less likely to achieve a good degree

A recent report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that students from less advantaged homes are 'more likely to drop out of their course' and are 'less likely to gain a good degree', even if they start their courses with similar entrance grades. The report analysed data relating to around 1 million undergraduate students in England who started a degree programme between the years 2004/05 and 2008/09. The research revealed that:

- Students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were 8.4% more likely to drop out of university within two years of starting their course, when compared with those from the most advantaged homes.
- They were also 13.3% less likely to complete their degree within five years, and 22.9% less likely to graduate with a first or 2:1.

When the researchers compared students who arrived at university with similar grades to study on the same course, these differences fell but still remained significant.

- Undergraduates from the 20% most disadvantaged backgrounds were still 3.4% more likely to drop out of university than those from the 20% most advantaged homes.
- They were 5.3% less likely to complete their degree studies and 3.7% less likely to graduate with a first or 2:1.

Asked to comment on the research findings, a spokeswoman BIS said 'A cornerstone of our HE reforms is to ensure that everybody has equal access to a university education'. This response can be probably translated as meaning 'What else did you expect?'

Universities that fail to meet standards should have degree awarding powers removed

The consumer group, 'Which?' has called for 'tougher regulation' of universities, saying that this was needed in order 'to encourage high standards and to punish failings' and that universities 'should provide more information to applicants on handling complaints'. In support of this, 'Which?' made reference to a recent survey of 1,023 undergraduates, which revealed that 33% of students said their course 'was not good value for money' and 30% rated their course as 'poor' (with the main reason given being concerns about the quality of teaching and the content of their courses). Fewer than half of the respondents (49%) described their course as being 'demanding' and only 45% felt seminars and lectures 'were generally worth attending'. The report also pointed out that, to cover the rising rate of loan debt default, students might soon see a significant increase in the interest rates they are charged on their loans. The current student loan terms and conditions mean that ministers have the power to increase rates without prior parliamentary approval and 'Which?' argues that because students are now taking on tens of thousands of pounds of debt, they need stronger regulatory protection.

The umbrella body, Universities UK, said higher student fees in England had 'undoubtedly raised

expectations'. Meanwhile, discussions are currently on going in respect of a new inspection and quality assurance system for HE. At present, universities are given up to two years notice of an impending inspection, which do not involve any observations of teaching and learning.

An alternative response to FE cuts?

In the mid-1870s, faced with rapidly increasing numbers of white settlers continuously pushing westward, the chiefs of native North American tribes traveled to Washington to protest to President Ulysses T Grant, that their ancestral land was being stolen from them, and to ask for his help in stopping this. President Grant responded by advising them to go back to their reservations and 'to try to endeavor to persevere'. The chiefs went back to their reservations, thought about President Grant's advice for a bit, and then declared war on the white man.

Hopefully, the Association of Colleges (AoC) and other sector representative groups are now vigorously engaged in developing robust strategies to resist the further massive education spending cuts that FE, more than any other education sector, is now facing. (Otherwise, there wouldn't really seem be much point in continuing to fork out the hefty membership fees, would there?). If the government responds to protests by telling colleges to 'try to endeavor to persevere' (or something similar), then perhaps the FE sector should declare war on the government.

For those who argue that there is nothing that can be done, here are a few suggestions. For a start, if every college governing body were to resign en masse, politicians and the national media would sit up and take a bit of notice. Colleges could also collectively refuse to have anything to do with the ceaseless stream of new initiatives being foisted on them by hyperactive ministers and civil servants, simply on the basis that they can simply no longer afford to. In addition, colleges could refuse permission for their staff to attend, participate in, co-operate with or serve on government boards, steering groups, working parties, policy reviews and commissions etc. They could also refuse to give their staff permission, or the time off needed, to perform the role of examiners, moderators, assessors or additional Ofsted inspectors etc. (In an odd sort of way, providing staff to help the government keep its educational bureaucracy running, seems vaguely similar to the Chinese government's practice of executing a person by firing squad and then presenting a bill to the deceased's family for the cost of the bullet). In the extreme, colleges might become even more militant and refuse to co-operate with Ofsted. If colleges really did have the appetite for this, then drawing a line in the sand against further cuts would be easier if the AoC organised this and led the way.

Like the native North American chiefs, colleges could take on the government and lose, but (as General Custer could have testified, had he survived the battle of the Little Big Horn) it would at least cause the government a bit of inconvenience and embarrassment, and might even win some concessions (particularly in the run up to a general election). And if the main political parties really do have a shared ambition to kill off most of FE as we know it, and to privatise whatever is left, then if only for all those people for whom FE is their only real chance of ever obtaining a qualification or learning a skill, surely it would be better for the FE sector to fight and rage, rather than to just go quietly into that dark night.

(This, of course, has been a personal rant)

...And finally

As part of a modern history project covering the 30th anniversary of the miners' strike, an FE lecturer invited a retired miner who had taken part in the strike to come into college to talk to her class. The miner spoke to a captivated audience of students about the strike and what it was like for the miners and their families. When the miner had left, the class discussed what he had said to them. At the end of the class discussion one of the students pointed out that he couldn't help noticing that the miner had worn his cap on for the whole of the time he had spoken to the class, and asked if there was any significance in this.

'Well', replied the lecturer, 'He is a local hero. There was a cave-in down the pit where he worked and the miners were in mortal danger of being suffocated or crushed. However, that brave man stood under one of the beams and supported it on his head while the other miners scrambled to safety. Unfortunately, the weight of the beam bearing down on him flattened the top of his head. He's a bit embarrassed by how this looks, so he never takes his cap off, not even in the bath'.

'He's also got a very prominent cauliflower ear' said another student, who went on to ask 'How did he get that?' 'Well', said the lecturer 'That was caused by the other miners hitting him with a lump-hammer to keep him upright'.

Alan Birks – November 2014

*As usual, the views and opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those held by **Click***

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