

Sector Developments

More FE cuts on the way

At a meeting of the West Midlands Finance Directors' Group, held to discuss the implications of the Chancellor's Autumn Statement for the FE sector, speakers from Lloyds and Barclays Banks (who have the largest level of involvement in the FE sector) said that:

- In 2013/4 the English FE sector as a whole was in deficit and big 'claw backs' are expected in the wake of 2013/14 college funding claims. (One college is expected to be facing 'claw back' in excess of £5 million).
- The FE sector will be facing further massive funding cuts after next year's general election, irrespective of which political party (or parties) forms the next government.
- By 2016/17 all post 19 provision in colleges in England will be funded through loans.
- All mainstream FE budgets will be unprotected, including 16-19 budgets. The only 'ring fenced' funding (and opportunity for growth) will be in relation to apprenticeships. Even with apprenticeship funding there will be no guarantee of funding apprenticeship growth as part of end of year reconciliation funding. Instead, the case for increased apprenticeship funding will need to be made in-year.
- There will be fewer quality issues for the FE commissioner to deal with, but far more financial ones.
- The provision of GCSE mathematics and English for 16-18 year olds without a grade C in these subjects will remain a condition of funding.
- Colleges will need to be realistic about implications of the cuts and take action to realign their strategies to deal with them. The management of costs 'was the key'.
- A much greater proportion of college funding will be channelled through Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) as part of a wider political devolution strategy.
- The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) is concerned about college governance, saying that the ability and skills displayed in governing bodies was 'mixed'. BIS is apparently uncertain as to whether governance is robust enough to respond to the challenges and risks that colleges will have to deal with.
- BIS is concerned about the continued use of subcontracting by colleges (particularly where there does not appear to be any direct 'strategic fit') and is also concerned about the quality of some sub-contracted provision.
- The speakers advised colleges to get 'back to basics' and 'focus their attention on core provision and success rates'. They should 'forget about vanity projects'. (How this aligns with pressure to diversify income streams and reduce reliance on public funding is unclear)

Following on from this, the new combined SFA/EFA chief executive Peter Lauener has warned colleges that politicians from all parties have made it clear that they 'expect to cut spending further in order to eliminate the public sector financial deficit', and it would be 'very surprising if the post-16 sector was immune from that'. He went on to say that it was likely that a 'growing number of colleges will find themselves in financial difficulties'. Mr Lauener advised that in order 'to cope with ongoing austerity measures, colleges need to look hard at their financial strategy'. In particular, they 'need to look hard at their curriculum resourcing plan and make sure they've got a plan that they can afford'. He also said that the government thinks that overall responsibility for this 'rests at corporation level', saying he would 'much rather that these problems were sorted at corporation level rather than through intervention from the funding agencies'. This appears to reinforce the cynical view that the primary role of a college corporation is to be there for the government to blame.

BIS to provide loans to colleges in financial difficulty

General FE colleges in England (but not sixth form colleges) that are faced with financial pressures and are unable to secure further borrowing from the banks will now be able to apply for loans from the BIS. The new BIS loans will replace the current Skills Funding Agency (SFA) system that involves a college in financial difficulty being provided with an 'advance of funds'. Colleges already in receipt of SFA advances of funding will have their borrowing converted into BIS loans. Colleges will be able to apply for short-term loans to be repaid within 3 months, or medium-term loans that are required to be repaid with a year, or longer-term loans with a variable repayment schedule. The first two options leave colleges vulnerable to the risk of financial 'Notices of Concern' being issued by the SFA and the possibility of a visit from FE Commissioner. However in the case of longer term loans, even just submitting an application will see the

SFA issue a financial notice of concern and prompt a visit from the FE Commissioner. A BIS spokesperson said that the new loan arrangements are intended to provide 'greater transparency' than advances of funds, because successful applications will have been subject to much higher levels of scrutiny, including by the SFA, BIS, the Department for Education (DfE), the EFA, Ofsted and the FE Commissioner. There are also likely to be requirements that stringent conditions are met before loans are granted. These conditions could include a requirement that there should be a change in college leadership and governance.

Fourth National College announced (with three more planned)

Despite the massive cuts to the FE budget elsewhere in England, Prime Minister David Cameron has announced funding for the establishment of new National College for Digital Skills. This will be England's fourth national college and the courses it offers will, as the name suggests, be in digital skills and coding. There will be a particular focus on higher apprenticeships and foundation degrees for students aged 19+, along with provision for 16-18 year olds, all at Level 3 and above. There will be a new campus for the college that will be based in London, which is scheduled to open in 2016. The new college will join three other new National Colleges for the nuclear, fracking and rail (HS2) industries announced earlier this year.

And now BIS has announced a further wave of employer-led colleges, along with £80 million of government capital funding (which is expected to be matched by businesses) to create another 3 new national colleges, this time for the manufacturing, wind energy and creative and cultural industries. These will be:

- The National College for Advanced Manufacturing will be established in Sheffield and Coventry in partnership with the High Value Manufacturing 'Catapult' (whatever this is) and the Engineering Employers Federation.
- The National College for Wind Energy will be established in the Humber.
- The National College for the Creative and Cultural Industries will be founded at the Backstage Centre in Essex and will be managed by a consortium of employers including 'Live Nation' and the Royal Opera House.

BIS criticised for slow progress in reducing the costs of FE bureaucracy

Slow progress in implementing a BIS 'simplification plan' intended to reduce the level of FE bureaucracy has been criticised by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) after a National Audit Office (NAO) investigation found that costs to colleges and other providers had been cut by less than 2% since the plan's inception. PAC chair, Margaret Hodge said 'I am incredibly frustrated that the efforts of BIS to cut bureaucracy have not reduced the administrative burden faced by the FE sector'. She went on to say 'The department's simplification plan has brought cost savings of only £4m, which is just a tiny fraction of the £7 billion that goes to FE providers each year', and that 'Many providers feel that the weight of bureaucracy put on them by complex funding and assurance arrangements is the same or greater than before the plan'. Ms Hodge added that she was 'Deeply concerned that public money is being spent on unnecessary administration and was being diverted away from learners'.

An NAO spokesperson said 'A much more serious effort by BIS is needed to meet the PAC's concerns and to deliver better value for money in a sector that is already hard-pressed'. The spokesperson went on to make reference to 'over-complexity in the further education sector and the unnecessary burden this places on training providers' and added that BIS 'needs to consider more radical ways to simplify complex funding arrangements'. Responding to the criticism, a BIS spokesperson disagreed with the NAO findings and insisted that BIS had 'made good progress in removing and reducing bureaucracy for FE providers'. The spokesperson went on to say that 'Funding and inspection systems have been streamlined, and providers tell us that this has had a positive impact'.

BIS has 'wasted £ millions' in financial support for private HE colleges and students

BIS has also been criticised by the PAC for wasting £millions of public funding in providing financial support for private HE colleges in England. Since September 2012, publicly funded universities and colleges offering HE courses have been allowed to charge tuition fees to £9,000 per year for full-time undergraduate study. However, as part of the government's push to increase HE numbers, BIS has allowed students at private HE colleges (referred to by BIS as 'alternative HE providers') to borrow up to £6,000 per year from the government's Student Loans Company (SLC) to pay tuition fees, which BIS pays directly to the private HE College on behalf of the students. In addition to tuition fees, private HE students are also able to apply for a loan of up to £7,000 to support them while they are studying, plus up to a further £3,000 in a non-

repayable, means-tested maintenance grant. Amongst other things, this has made the provision of undergraduate level courses (which include Higher National Diplomas and Certificates) a very attractive financial proposition for private HE providers and has resulted in what the SLC has called a 'massive spike in their loans and grant outlay'. As at September 2012 around 13,000 private HE college students accessed £125 million in government funded loan and grant support. By September 2013 these numbers had increased to 33,600 students receiving £425million in government loans and grant support, and by September 2014 numbers had increased still further to 53,000 students accessing £675 million in government loans and grants (an increase of 650% from when the loans and grants were first made available). In response to this, the NAO carried out an investigation, which has subsequently revealed that:

- The level of student drop out in private HE provision was many times higher than the public HE sector average.
- Many of the students recruited to private HE colleges did not possess the necessary entry qualifications or English language skills.
- Amongst private students taking Higher National qualifications in 2012/13, more than 20% were never actually registered for a course with an awarding body.
- There were 'unusual patterns' in private HE applications and recruitment. (For example, in addition to very high levels of student recruitment from the EU in general, more than 80% of new students at some private HE colleges were from Romania or Bulgaria).
- There was evidence of multiple applications for loans being made from single households. (For example, around 50 applications a day had been sent from a single internet address).

The NAO report concluded that:

- The government's drive to expand private higher education provision had not been accompanied by adequate checks to protect public funds. (For example, a review of a sample of around 11,000 private HE students from elsewhere in the EU revealed that around half could not show any evidence that they were properly eligible for loans. Within this total, an estimated £5.4 million had already been paid to 992 ineligible students, without any eligibility checks. Payments were eventually suspended).
- BIS had rushed through what is known as 'designation', which is the process that allows the SLC to fund students on a particular course at a particular institution, without any on-site inspection. (For example BIS approved 98 courses at a single institution in only four working days).
- As a result, the NAO deemed that BIS regulatory framework in respect of private HE provision not fit for purpose. This was made worse by a lack of clear division of responsibility between BIS and the SLC.

Given the very high drop-out rates, the NAO has expressed serious concerns that a considerable proportion of the public funding allocated to meet the massive increase in applications for loans and grants for private HE provision may never be recovered. Others have expressed concern that huge expansion in private HE provision may, in part, be explained by the increased opportunity it has provided for bogus students to access SLC loans and grants, which will never be repaid. The difficulties currently being experienced by the SLC in tracing students who have left, or never started, their courses, (particularly applicants from elsewhere in the EU), seems to add weight to this view.

In response to the NAO report findings, a spokesperson for BIS said the department would continue to 'investigate and take robust action against any private HE provider failing to meet the high standards expected of them' and that it had thus far suspended funding and loan payments at 23 private HE colleges. The spokesperson went on to say that the department had also 'introduced controls to limit the expansion of private HE colleges' and had now 'established a clear register of designated courses'.

However, the BIS spokesperson warned that the department still had 'no right to access data belonging to private colleges, or even to sequester information from the relevant exam boards, even though both take public money', adding that 'without these and other powers, department officials can't work out how many students are attending, or whether colleges are teaching to a level where a reasonable proportion of students are likely to pass their courses'.

Looking on the bright side, the amount of public money lost, or at risk of being lost through bogus claims for HE loans and grants has not yet reached the levels associated with Individual Learning Accounts where the NAO estimated that more than £100 million of public money was lost through fraudulent claims in the period between when the scheme was launched in 2000 and when it was discontinued in 2001

Meanwhile, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, as part of his Autumn Statement, has announced that student loans scheme in England will be extended to post-graduate students. These students will now be eligible to apply for loans of up to £10,000. The scheme will be administered by the SLC with post-graduate study fees being paid up front to the university by BIS. The SLC will then seek to recover the loan on the same basis as it does with undergraduate loans.

Learndirect is accused of charging 'extortionate' management fees to sub-contractors

Learndirect, which is currently the contractor with the largest SFA contract in England, is charging management fees of up to 40% of contract values. (Management fees are charged for such things as marketing, IT support services, legal compliance and performance monitoring). Learndirect has a current SFA allocation of £153 million and has 70 subcontractors, including colleges, charities and independent learning providers. The SFA now requires all providers to list the management fees they charge when taking on subcontractors and has also required providers to retrospectively declare what they have charged each subcontractor during the last academic year (2013/14). Learndirect failed to meet the latter requirement, but has published information that reveals that the management fees it charges sub-contractors can be as high as 40%. Commenting on this, a spokesperson for the firm said that the amount actually charged 'often fell short of this' depending on the level of central services it provided to the sub-contractor. Against this, sub-contractors argue that excessive fees charged depletes the resources they need to provide students with high quality teaching and learning.

Learndirect, which is a private company owned by Lloyds Development Capital (a subsidiary of Lloyds Bank), allegedly made a gross profit of £22 million from its 2013/14 SFA contract.

Employer National Insurance Contributions for apprentices is abolished

Also as part of his Autumn Statement, Mr Osborne announced that employers will no longer have to pay National Insurance Contributions (NIC) on the wages paid to apprentices aged 24 and under. In making the announcement, Mr Osborne said 'This means that employers of around half a million apprentices will be exempt from paying employer NI contributions'. Employers currently make NIC for any employees earning more than £153 a week, including apprentices, although those earning the apprentice minimum wage of £2.73 per hour would not have breached that threshold in any event. Nevertheless, it is estimated that the change will cost the government £105 million in 2016/17, £110 million in 2017/18, £120 million in 2018/19 and £125 million in 2019/20.

Ofsted publishes its 2013/14 Annual Report

Ofsted's latest annual report identifies an increase in the proportion of providers judged as 'good' or 'outstanding', but then goes on to warn that 'one in every six students are still being taught by providers judged as being less than good'. The report says that in the 2013/14 academic year:

- 3.2 million students were attending courses delivered by 'good' or 'outstanding' providers.
- 81% of providers inspected were judged to be 'good' or 'outstanding' (compared with 72% in 2012/13, and 64% in 2011/12).
- 30% of providers inspected did not improve their overall effectiveness grade, and a small number saw a deterioration in their overall effectiveness compared with their previous inspection grade. (Inspectors said that the main reason for this was that many of these providers had failed to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and learners were not making adequate progress towards their learning goals).

The report also went on to say:

- Colleges and schools with sixth forms 'had failed to respond to the requirements of the new 16-19 study programmes quickly enough'.
- English and mathematics teaching and learning was 'still not good enough'.
- Too many young people leave the FE sector 'with insufficient direct experience of work at external employers' and 'without the skills and attitudes employers are looking for'.

Commenting on the report, Ofsted chief inspector for England, Sir Michael Wilshaw said 'It is encouraging that we have seen an increase in the proportion of FE providers judged to be good or outstanding at their latest inspection', but qualified this by saying 'However, I am concerned that there is not enough good teaching in the subject areas where it is needed most'. Sir Michael also called for greater employer engagement in the sector because 'too many providers are still not equipping learners with the knowledge

and skills that employers seek’.

Policy on continued GCSE mathematics and English study by 16-18 year olds is ‘watered down’

The government has decided that 16-18 year old students without GCSE passes at grades A* to C in mathematics and English, who are studying on programmes consisting of less than 150 hours, are to be exempt from having to engage in any further study of the subjects, Professor Alison Wolf (author of the Wolf Report on 16-19 Vocational Qualifications) has warned against this, saying that the students affected would ‘miss out on the single most useful thing they could achieve’. Her comments came in response to the announcement of the change in rules by Skills and Equalities Minister for England, Nick Boles, at the recent AoC conference. The change itself has now been confirmed in the ‘Mathematics and English Condition of Funding Guidance’, published earlier this month (December) and comes into effect immediately.

A DfE spokesperson denied that Professor Wolf’s original recommendations were being ‘watered down’, explaining that the change had been introduced because the government wanted ‘to support those individuals who might work part-time or have caring responsibilities and are considering a route back into education through short or part time evening course’. The spokesperson went on to say that this would ‘allow the small number of 16-18 year olds taking these types of courses to focus on the core elements of the subject they are studying’ and insisted that the change affected less than 2% of the 16-18 cohort.

Second phase of mathematics training for FE staff announced

Apart from those students exempted (see above), from the start of this academic year, all other students on post-16 courses aged 16-18 without at least a grade C in either English and/or mathematics are required to continue working towards passing the subjects.

In response to this, in November last year, the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) and the Association of Centres for Excellence in College Education in Teacher Training (ACETT) launched ‘phase one’ of a new ‘Mathematics Enhancement Programme’ (MEP). The programme was designed to increase the number of FE lecturers capable of teaching mathematics at GCSE level. By the end of the 2013/14 academic year, more than 2,200 FE lecturers had completed the phase one MEP programme, which concentrated on preparing Functional Skills mathematics teachers to teach GCSE.

The ETF has now announced that a contract has been agreed with a consortium of partners led by Tribal Education to develop ‘phase two’ of the MEP, with a view to offering courses from early next academic year. A spokesperson for the ETF said that the second phase ‘would be more flexible than phase one, as the different groups will need different pathways tailored to their different teaching needs’. The new courses will therefore be aimed at:

- Teachers who have completed the first MEP but who still do not feel confident enough to teach GCSE mathematics.
- Functional Skills teachers who want to teach mathematics GCSE courses.
- Vocational training teachers who use mathematics already (for example to teach motor vehicle and engineering courses).
- GCSE mathematics teachers who needed support ‘getting up to speed’ with teaching the new GCSE mathematics syllabus.

Ofqual confirms the end of QCF

Ofqual has confirmed that the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) rules will be removed with effect from summer 2015 as part of its ‘wider plans to strengthen vocational qualifications’. Commenting on the decision, a spokesperson for Ofqual said ‘The QCF one-size-fits-all approach just isn’t right for every qualification’, and went on to say ‘Removing the QCF rules means that awarding bodies will be able to design qualifications that meet better the needs of employers’. The spokesperson added that ‘Ending shared units will also mean that awarding bodies take clear and sole responsibility for the quality of every single part of their qualifications’. Ofqual says that it ‘will be working closely with awarding organisations, government bodies and others, to enable a smooth transition’.

New ‘College of Teaching’ to be created in England

The General Teaching Council (GTC) for England was a professional, regulatory body for teaching. It was launched in 2000, but was abolished by the current government in 2010 (although the General Teaching Councils established in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland still exist). Education Secretary for England,

Nicky Morgan and Schools Minister for England, David Laws have now launched a consultation on the establishment of a new 'College of Teaching' for England. In a joint statement with Mr Laws, Ms Morgan said that she wants teaching to be seen 'as having a similar status as professions such as medicine and law' and went on to say that teaching (in England) is 'almost unique amongst the professions in lacking such an organisation'.

Despite the cuts in public spending elsewhere, the new college is expected to open within the next two years, and is intended to 'allow teachers, like other professions, to set their own high standards for their members'. The government is also proposing to set up a fund 'to provide evidence-based professional development, led by a network of more than 600 outstanding teaching schools'. Responding to the proposal, the shadow Education Secretary for England, Tristram Hunt said that the government, in 'allowing unqualified teachers into our classrooms on a permanent basis' had 'signed off on the lowest entry requirements for teaching anywhere in the developed world'.

Steep rise in the number of GCSE and A-level grades changed

In the summer 2014 examination series:

- There were more than 22 million examination entries, up from just under 20 million in 2013 (a rise of 11%).
- In total, there were 451,000 individual enquiries about results, up from 304,400 in 2013 (a rise of 48%).
- 77,400 examination grades were changed, up from 54,400 in 2013 (a rise of 42%).
- For GCSE, 292,350 qualification results were challenged. Of those that were changed, 53,850 went up and 400 went down.
- At A-level, 122,500 results were challenged, with 22,550 going up and 600 down.

A spokesperson for the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) described these as 'staggering figures' and said that the ASCL's own data showed that around 95% of schools and colleges had submitted appeals and around 25% had seen changes to marks, but that this had come 'too late for some students who were relying on grades for university or college placements or other career paths'. In response, a spokesperson for Ofqual said 'despite the scale of the system, problems are relatively rare', but did confirm that Ofqual 'was concerned about the rising number of challenges to results'. A spokesperson for the DfE said that the department was working closely with Ofqual and with the examination boards 'to ensure they were taking the necessary steps to improve the quality of marking'.

Introduction of new mathematics AS and A levels delayed until September 2017

Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, who famously once said that 'he would rather have a physics graduate from Oxbridge without a PGCE teaching in a school than a physics graduate from one of the rubbish universities with a PGCE', has announced that the introduction of new mathematics AS and GCE A levels in schools and colleges in England will be delayed until September 2017, saying that the delay would give students 'the benefit of having studied the new GCSE mathematics syllabus which starts next year'. Mr Gibbs went on to say that the delay would 'also allow more time for schools to prepare for the new courses'. Mr Gibb's decision follows advice from the exams regulator Ofqual and the A level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB) that the current GCSE and the new A level 'would not line up in terms of content' and that the current GCSE 'does not have the same building blocks as the new GCSE to prepare students for the mathematical problem-solving content in the new A level'. The decision to delay the introduction of the new syllabi appears to have helped allay the fears of school and college leaders who had expressed concerns that they might have had to lay on 'transition courses because there was such a significant difference in the breadth and depth of content at both GCSE and A level'.

Nick Gibb was Schools Minister from 2010-12 then appointed as Schools Minister again from July 2014.

New GCSE in history will include a module on immigration

The OCR exam board has unveiled plans for a new history GCSE, in which 'Migration into Britain' will be included as part of an extended study theme making up around 20% cent of the syllabus. The new course will provide students with the opportunity to study 2000 years of immigration, from the Romans up to 21st century arrivals from Syria. The syllabus will cover the reasons for immigration, the experience of new

entrants and the impact on the indigenous population. The proposed new GCSE will be submitted to the government next year and will be taught from 2016, subject to approval from Ofqual.

North Korean schoolchildren to study the life and thoughts of Kim Jong-un

Carrying on with the theme of curriculum reform, South Korea's state-owned KBS World Radio claims it has obtained a copy of the North Korean Education Committee's 'Compulsory Education Outline', which apparently establishes 'the history of Kim Jong-un as an official school subject'. The radio station alleges that North Korean schoolchildren will be required to complete 81 hours of study of Kim Jong-un over three years, and goes on to say that because as yet there are no textbooks that could help them understand the leader's life, 'classes will be taught using materials from the ruling Workers' Party of Korea and Kim's quotes and orders given to the North Korean ruling party and military'. Children in the North Korea's schools are already required to take courses on key political personalities, including 160 hours of study on the country's founder, Kim Il-sung.

Schools must do more to build their pupils' character, grit and resilience'

Moving on from North Korea and following hot foot on his earlier proposals that teachers should be required to swear an oath to always do their best (or something like that), Tristram Hunt, the shadow Education Secretary for England has come up with another proposal. Dr Hunt has already argued that exclusive public schools like the one he attended should do more to help struggling inner city schools (perhaps to help them become more like public schools?). However, his latest idea is that state schools and colleges should, like public schools, be doing more 'to build the character and resilience' of their pupils and students. Speaking at a conference organised by the left leaning think tank Demos, Dr Hunt said 'Winston Churchill was bang on when he said failure is not fatal and it is the courage to continue that counts'. Beginning to sound a little like an old boy who had come back from the colonies and had been asked to give a talk at his old school's speech day, he went on to say 'Success is built by overcoming failure' and 'the ability to bounce back is a particularly British trait'. Expanding on the theme, Dr Hunt said 'The great British spirit comes from our ability to overcome adversity and setbacks', and that he wanted to see 'the great British spirit in all our classrooms'. Presumably in order to make absolutely certain that the audience was in no doubt as to what he meant, Dr Hunt went on to say 'Character, resilience, the ability to bounce back: it's what makes us British'.

Responding to Dr Hunt, Demos Chief executive Claudia Wood somewhat gently explained that the think tank was already running pilot projects to see how the teaching of 'character' could work in practice, 'particularly amongst white working-class children'. No doubt because of the particular emphasis given to such activity by public schools (playing fields of Eton, and all that), she said that Demos was examining how extracurricular activities such as sport 'could transform pupils' self-esteem and self-reliance'. As an example of this, Ms Wood referred to a group of once troublesome 14-year-olds who were now running a school sports club after persuading staff to let them do it. Ms Wood said that they had 'overcome setbacks, such as older students wanting to take over' and that 'their behaviour had improved so much, the school might even make them prefects'.

Presumably not wanting to see the government lose the high ground, Education Secretary for England, Nicky Morgan said, 'Call it grit, resilience, or just skills for the 21st century, but there is a growing consensus from all parties that character matters'. She then drew attention to the £5 million 'Character Innovation Fund', announced by the government in September, and said that from January 2015, schools in England wanting to develop 'resilience and grit' in their pupils will be able to apply for 'Character Awards' worth up to £15,000. (Perhaps a similar grant should be made available to help stiffen the upper lip of staff in colleges and to 'show the great British spirit' in the face of further massive budget cuts).

Sutton Trust calls for more support for able pupils in English state schools reach their potential.

The recent Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission report revealed that disadvantaged children in England who start out as high-achievers are often overtaken by children of average ability from better-off families. The report says that 'nearly 2,200 fewer disadvantaged students attend elite universities than would be expected if they had followed the same educational trajectory as their better-off peers with similar abilities at the age of 11'.

Following on from this, the Sutton Trust, a leading educational charity, has called on the UK government to provide more support to help able children from English state schools to achieve their full potential. The

Trust says that 'in any given school year, around 60,000 bright pupils do not make it to any university at all, despite their early promise'. The Trust has called on ministers to introduce a national programme with ring-fenced funding for highly able state school students, similar to the Trust's own programme that each year sends around 400 bright 11-14 year-olds to seminars and residential teaching sessions at Russell Group universities. The Trust that says this is just one model for how a national support programme could work. A DfE spokesperson responded to the Trust's proposal, saying that the government's aim 'is to raise standards at all schools, so every child, including the most gifted, can achieve their full potential' and pointed out that schools in England are 'free to use their funding to offer extra support to talented children, as well as using pupil premium money to help those from poorer backgrounds'.

Claims that a Birmingham Islamic school used public funds to set up another school in Pakistan

Al-Hijrah School in Birmingham is a voluntary aided Islamic faith school that receives its funding from Birmingham City Council. The school's pupils are predominantly of Pakistani heritage and the school describes itself as 'a pioneering institution focusing on establishing an educational system which delivers high academic standards within an Islamic environment'. However, Birmingham City Council officers are currently investigating allegations that the school has spent more than £1million of taxpayers' money on setting up a brand new, state of the art school in the Pakistan city of Ziarat. A spokesperson for Birmingham City Council said 'We have gathered enough information to warrant investigation into the use of public funds and we continue to work with the relevant statutory agencies'. Meanwhile, the Al-Hijrah school itself is apparently in a state of considerable disrepair, with one school insider saying 'The school is falling apart, its roof is leaking and there is little space for outdoor play. Yet the trust has used £1million to build a new school in Pakistan. It beggars belief'.

This is the latest controversy to hit the school. In May this year, it was placed in special measures after being judged 'inadequate' in a damning Ofsted report. A month later the whole governing body was removed in response to the difficulties the school was facing, including a £900,000 budget deficit and allegations that the school was still engaging in unacceptable practices (such as continuing to segregate boys and girls and insisting on separate meeting rooms for male and female teachers). The former chair of governors did not take kindly to his removal, and has since been accused of leading a harassment and intimidation campaign against the new interim board and management. In July, the City Council took out a legal injunction banning him from entering the school.

Councils in England expected to meet the cost of schools converting to academy status

The Local Government Authority (LGA) says that local councils in England have had to pay out at least £22 million for legal bills and to cover budget deficits, associated with the conversion of local authority schools into academies. When a school becomes a sponsored academy it is allowed to keep any budget surpluses (rather than handing the money back to the council), however any budget deficits outstanding at the point of conversion are left with the local authority. Councils can also be required to pay some of the legal costs of transferring schools out of local authority control. The LGA argue that it is unfair for councils to have to subsidise the government's 'flagship' academy project when they are struggling to cope with budget cuts of around 40%. Responding to the LGA complaints, and displaying a spirit of reconciliation, a spokesperson for the Independent Academies Association said 'If local authorities had run their schools better in the first place there wouldn't have been any budget deficits for them to have to absorb'.

And finally...

It was Christmas. While the bankers responsible for the financial crisis were spending just a tiny fraction of their bonuses on champagne and Beluga caviar for lavish Christmas parties, and while the MPs who had implemented massive cuts in public sector budgets in response to the crisis they had caused were shopping in Knightsbridge, looking for presents to spend their 10% pay increases on, front line FE staff were facing a bleak Christmas. Many had already lost their jobs, even more were at risk of losing their jobs and those staff lucky enough to still in a job had seen their pay frozen for years, or in some cases even cut.

This is the story of a young FE lecturer employed on a zero hours contract. Because he had no guarantee of regular work or income, Christmas Eve found him struggling for cash. He already had pawned his bike and the wristwatch he had inherited from his late father so that he could buy a few Christmas presents for his three young children. With the small amount left over and with help from the local food bank, he had been able to provide most of the groceries for the family Christmas dinner, but try as he might, he couldn't scrape enough money together to pay for a Christmas turkey.

The family had a pet dog. The dog had been a stray, abandoned by his previous owner. They had found the pup the wandering the streets, lame and half starved, and had taken him in and nursed him back to health. The dog was now very old and was sadly at a stage where he was on his last legs. Desperate, and not knowing what else to do, the lecturer looked down at the dog, and the dog looked up back at him, as if to say, 'I understand'.

Well, to cut a long story short, Christmas day arrived and the family sat down to their Christmas dinner. The meal consisted of roast potatoes, sprouts, sage and onion stuffing, gravy, and a very strange looking turkey with four legs and a tail. After the meal there had been some very awkward questions about the turkey from the children, who had also inquired as to the whereabouts of the dog. In spite of this, it was the first decent meal the family had eaten in ages, and all that was left of it was a pile of bones on a side plate.

The lecturer looked at the bones in silence for a while, then his lower lip began to quiver and a tear rolled down his cheek. 'What's the matter?' his wife asked. More tears welled up in her husband's eyes. 'Don't worry', she said tenderly, 'I know that this past year has been hard for us, but next year will be a much better year, just you wait and see'.

'No, it's not that', said the lecturer. His wife put her arm around his shoulders to comfort him and said, 'What is it that's upsetting you then?' Choking down a quiet sob, the lecturer looked at his wife, and said 'I was just thinking'. The lecturer looked at the plate again, and his wife asked softly, 'what were you thinking? With reddened eyes, he looked up at her, sniffed and replied '...I was just thinking.... our dog would have loved those bones'.

*From all of us at **Click**, we would like to wish you and yours a very merry Christmas and a happy new year*

Alan Birks – December 2014

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

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