

Click Newsletter

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FE Developments

Wolf Review published

The long awaited Wolf Review has now been published. The report has been generally well received within the sector. Some of the main recommendations include the following:

- FE lecturers with QTLS (qualified teacher learning and skills) status should be allowed to teach in schools. School teachers with QTS (qualified teacher status) are already allowed to teach in FE colleges and the proposed reciprocal arrangement for FE lecturers to teach in schools rectifies what many see as a discriminatory practice.
- The number of low achieving students progressing to level 2 courses at age 16 should be *'greatly increased'*. However, 16-19 year olds without good GCSE grades in Maths and English should be required and supported to take steps to obtain these qualifications and colleges should be helped with the funding needed to deliver this.
- Students should *'not be prevented from taking equal or lower level courses if they choose to switch sector or subject'*. A set of general principles on the content time, assessment and general structure of 16-19 vocational courses should be drawn up and there should be a *'fixed level of funding for all FE students, varying between courses'*.
- Students should be encouraged to engage in *'non qualifications based activity'* and colleges should avoid teaching *'entirely occupational based'* courses. FE funding and performance measures should focus on *'employment outcomes'*, rather than the *'accrual of vocational qualifications'*.
- It should not be compulsory for qualifications to conform to the Qualifications and Accreditation Framework (QCF), which was primarily drawn up to *'recognise smaller steps of learning and to enable students to build up qualifications bit by bit'*. Following on from this, the Secretary of State for Education should be given the power to approve qualifications which *'play an important role in the vocational education system'*, but which have not yet been approved by the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs).
- Apprenticeship Frameworks should be re-evaluated to assess the extent to which there is a sufficient general educational content to allow apprentices to progress to higher education.
- There should be *'an end to the micro management of FE'*.

The Department for Education's response to the report is expected later in the spring.

Ofqual (the Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulations) requires FE qualifications to have 'greater relevance'

Some may say that perhaps this might be a little late, but in responding to the Wolf review of vocational education, Fiona Pethick, the Ofqual Director of Regulation, has said that vocational qualifications must have more relevance to the needs of learners and employers.

She went on to say that qualifications should also focus more closely on facilitating progression into employment and further and/or higher education. Therefore, in addition to monitoring the quality and standards of qualifications offered, Ms Pethwick has said that

Ofqual will now be holding awarding organisations to account for the relevance of these qualifications to the needs of learners and employers.

Ofqual has also called on colleges and universities to communicate clearly in respect of which entry qualifications they want applicants for their courses to have, and for employers to state clearly the qualifications they are looking for in respect of the jobs they are offering.

30% increase in University entrants with BTEC qualifications

Pearson, the firm which owns the BTEC accreditation brand, has undertaken research which shows that between 2007/8 and 2008/9, there was a 30% increase in students entering university with BTEC qualifications. The research also shows that for university students aged between 20 and 30, over half had previously studied for BTEC qualifications.

For those concerned that BTEC awards may be a soft option, this pattern is reflected in applications for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) courses, with the number of BTEC applicants for mathematics courses rising by 50% and for engineering courses by 45% over the same period.

Pearson called on Professor Alison Wolf to recognise the value and contribution of BTEC programmes in the review of 14-19 vocational education and training.

Government to investigate new FE delivery models

Whilst many in the FE sector remain uncertain as to what this development actually means, the government is apparently taking steps to develop *'a revised policy on organisational delivery models within further education'*. The aim of the new policy is *'to encourage the creation of a diverse set of providers who have close links with their local community and are able, to use new, creative models of training delivery'*. Whether this is because they think that FE colleges are not quite up to the mark is also unclear.

The new policy, when fully developed, is also intended to ensure that government responds quickly where colleges are failing, *'including radical action for total college failures which could encompass new providers and new delivery'*.

Policy development work on new delivery models is being steered by a project board made up of sector representatives, alongside BIS, the Skills Funding Agency and Department for Education and the outcome of the board's deliberations will be published sometime in the spring. I can hardly wait.

Wider Key Skills funding

Personally, I've never really understood the difference between basic skills, core skills, skills for life, key skills, wider key skills, essential skills and functional skills, however from 31 March 2011, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) will no longer be funding Wider Key Skills in the National Qualifications Framework for new starts for learners aged 19 and above. This is because the SFA has focussed funding on provision within the Qualifications and Credit Framework and believes that the knowledge, skills and understanding represented through existing Wider Key Skills qualifications should be available as part of the framework of unit based and credit bearing qualifications

Unfair Value Added Tax (VAT) burden on colleges

The FE sector currently pays around £221 million per year in VAT, and in the wake of recent increases in VAT rates will add a further £30 million per year. The Association of Colleges is therefore calling for FE and sixth form colleges to be treated the same as schools and academies in respect of VAT liability. Sixth form colleges claim that they are placed at a disadvantage compared to academies which are automatically exempted from any VAT liability. General FE colleges can only claim VAT back in limited circumstances, such as the VAT incurred in the cost of a new building which it can be proved is used by post 19 students for less than 5% of the time.

A spokesperson for the DfE has said that the VAT exemption currently enjoyed by academies was to ensure that schools converting to academy status were '*not placed at a disadvantage*'. However, she went on to say that there were '*no plans to extend VAT exemption to the FE sector*'. A spokesperson for BIS said that '*There were few opportunities to eliminate the VAT anomaly without compromising colleges' independence*', which curiously seems to imply that VAT exemption does not threaten the 'independence' of academies.

Cuts beginning to impact on FE jobs

Newcastle College, the largest FE college in the UK, is proposing to axe around one tenth of its workforce. The college is proposing to cut more than 170 posts, including 124 teaching, training and assessment jobs, in response to cuts in funding. At the same time Sheffield College has announced that 121 jobs are to go in order to meet a projected £4 million shortfall in funding.

Newcastle College and Sheffield College are not the first to be forced to reduce staffing levels in response to government cuts nor, sadly, are they likely to be the last.

UCU to ballot members on strike action in relation to pension downgrades

UCU has announced its intention to call for strike action to resist government proposals to raise the level of member pension contributions and to downgrade pension benefits.

The changes include raising the minimum retirement age at which pensions can be accessed to 65 and imposing an increase in pension contributions of around £88 per month for the typical lecturer. This is in addition to the earlier unilateral change in pension indexation from one based on the retail price index (RPI) to the lower consumer price index (CPI). The proposed changes would see the value of a typical lecturer's total pension package reduced by around £36,000.

The government is also proposing the phasing in of arrangements whereby instead of pensions being based on a lecturer's final salary, they will be based on average salary over the period of employment.

'Re-branding' of Apprenticeships announced

Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning minister, John Hayes, speaking at the recent launch of National Apprenticeship Week, has announced that apprenticeships are to be rebranded with the intention of conferring '*greater recognition and status*' on those who successfully complete their apprenticeship frameworks. He went on to say that he wanted to see apprenticeships providing progression to higher stages of learning, including entry to university.

Level 2 apprenticeships will now be called Intermediate Level Apprenticeships and level 3 apprenticeships will become Advanced Level Apprenticeships. Higher Apprenticeships at level 4 will remain unchanged. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKES) is '*actively working*' with Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) to further develop Higher Apprenticeship frameworks.

Businesses urged to hire more apprentices

The minister for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), Vince Cable, has re-affirmed the government's commitment to apprenticeships by increasing the apprenticeship budget to over £1,400 million in 2011-12. He has also encouraged more employers to '*drive economic growth by creating a new generation of skilled workers*'. Dr Cable said that the government was keen to work with business to deliver 100,000 more apprentices by 2014 and went on to say that investment in training the next generation of highly skilled workers would be key to sustainable economic growth. Dr. Cable also called for an end to '*outdated values that have seen vocational learning branded a poor relation to academic study*'.

Apprenticeship Training Agencies

The National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) has piloted the development of a number of Apprenticeship Training Agencies (ATAs). These are private businesses that recruit apprentices and then hire them out to employers. The ATA model is intended to extend high quality apprenticeship programmes to employers who, for various reasons, are unable or unwilling to directly employ apprentices. These reasons might include not being able to commit to provide an apprentice with employment for the period of the full framework or uncertainty about the value of taking on an apprentice.

Nits and Plebs

We already have those in the category 'not in employment, education and training' (NEETs), which unkindly often sounds like 'nits'. Now, John Hayes has gone further and, at the recent launch of the WorldSkills 2011 'Have a Go' campaign, has referred to a new social category of 'people lacking everyday basic skills, or 'plebs'.

Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) launches advice on using technology for learning

LLUK, the sector skills council for FE, has published the results of an investigation into how new technology is changing teaching and learning. The findings include practical advice for colleges in how to support their staff to develop skills in using technology for learning.

Lifelong Learning UK is now working with the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) to produce a website resource that will alert teachers, tutors and trainers to '*tried and tested*' technologies for use in learning which will be available from the end of March 2011.

Review of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)

A review of JISC has been conducted. The review makes recommendations in respect of the future of information and communications technology (ICT) development in FE and HE.

The review, chaired by Sir Alan Wilson, states that JISC has played a '*pivotal*' role as an enabler of innovation and widespread adoption of ICT in universities and colleges and argues that shared services, notably JANET, (the Joint Academic Network) have become '*indispensable*' to the higher and further education sectors. However, in apparent contradiction to this praise, the review then goes on to raise questions about the impact and effectiveness of JISC's activities. The complexity of JISC's activities, structure, processes and governance arrangements are also subject to criticism.

Recommendations arising from the review include the following:

- JISC should focus its activities so that they are clearly linked to FE and HE priorities.
- JISC services and projects should be rationalised with a view to significantly reducing their number and cost.
- JISC should become a separate legal entity funded through a combination of grants and subscriptions or user charges.
- JISC structure and processes should change, with the Board becoming smaller and more strategic.
- Discussions should be held with key stakeholders to determine the future funding strategy for ICT in higher and further education.

LSIS takes over Becta (British Education and Communications Technology Agency) functions

Becta has been abolished and LSIS has taken over the development of four key Becta development projects.

These include:

- Generator- an 'eMaturity' project. (I'm not sure what this is)
- The 'Technology Network' project. (Ditto)

- The 'eLeadership online' project
- Becta's FE research

These development projects will be merged with development projects currently being undertaken by LSIS, including the 'eCPD' and 'eGuides' project, and the 'Leadership Toolkit' and 'Leadership of Technology' programmes.

New LSIS funded CPD programme for FE middle managers

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) has provided funding for the 'New Engineering Federation' (NEF) to produce a new e learning based CPD programme for middle managers in FE. The new NEF FE middle management development programme is entitled 'Active Leadership and Innovation'.

By way of background, NEF is apparently a 'think tank' which 'supports vocational education in science and technology'. The NEF chief executive, Sa'ad Medhat, has said that *'at a time when colleges were implementing cuts and driving up efficiencies we should remember that, in challenge, rewards can be found'*. I suppose the acquisition of LSIS funding by NEF proves his point.

LSIS publishes strategic implications policy paper: 'The New World we're in'

LSIS has published a new 'strategic implications policy paper' enigmatically entitled 'The New World we're in'. The paper is intended to provide a strategic overview of government policy shifts and the implications for the FE sector and for LSIS itself. The paper argues that, given the current economic climate and the government's growth and skills strategy, the contribution of the further education sector is fundamental to economic recovery and future prosperity. This, in turn, creates both opportunities and responsibilities for the sector, which include the following:

- Developing the skills and capabilities of the current and future workforce.
- Delivering the ambition of achieving full participation in education and training up to the age of 18;
- Renewing the focus on the wider benefits of learning for individuals and for communities (beyond what have been defined as economically valuable skills).
- Supporting equality, fairness and social mobility at a time when the vulnerability of the most disadvantaged individuals, families and groups in society is increasing.

LSIS (Learning and Skills Improvement service) 2011/12 Budget agreed

LSIS has been allocated £31 million to fund improvements in teaching, learning and the general quality of provision in FE in 2011/12. This equates to around £80,000 per college. Responsibility for providing LSIS with funds to supporting 19+ provision currently rests with the SFA, with the DfE providing funds for supporting 16-19 provision. The DfE funding element is scheduled to cease in March 2012 and it is currently uncertain as to how funds for 16-19 support will be provided after that date.

(Who said Quangos were dead?)

Institute for Learning (IfL) publishes its second report on CPD in FE

The Institute for Learning has published its second report on the impact of continuing professional development (CPD) in FE. The report has been given the somewhat Alan Partridge-esque title, *'Excellence in Professional Development: Looking Back, Looking Forward'*.

The main findings of the review include the following:

- Most IfL members are carrying out more than the minimum number of hours of CPD required. (Around 49 hours of CPD in the 2009/10 academic year), with trainee teachers carrying out even more CPD, on average, than other teachers.

- There is an increased level of CPD sharing amongst members. 64% of members said they shared their CPD with a colleague, compared to 44% in the previous survey and 67% said they shared their CPD with their employer, compared to 46% in the previous survey.
- The review also shows more members are reporting that they are '*using mobile technology to capture the effects of CPD on themselves and others*'. (I think that it is probably safe to assume that this does not include 'happy slapping').

IfL publishes 'Impact Review'

The IfL has also published a review highlighting the IfL's main achievements in 2009/10. The review includes an analysis of member feedback on the IfL's impact on professional practice and goes on to outline proposals to extend IfL member support over the coming year. These proposals include:

- Career development and progression.
- Promoting QTLS or ATLS professional status.
- Professional networking opportunities
- Enhanced membership benefits packages.
- An improved website and online channels including social network and online communities.

Possible boycott of IfL membership.

In the meantime, the IfL has been required to move from a position where the government meets most of the costs of running the IfL, to the riskier position of running costs being met by members. The IfL is therefore proposing to raise annual membership fees from £30 to £68. In response to this, the University and Colleges' Union (UCU) has conducted its own survey of 900 members, and contrary to IfL claims in the review above, the union's own findings are that large numbers of lecturers are questioning the benefits of IfL membership. The UCU survey also highlights dissatisfaction with the burden of the 'form filling' needed to prove that lecturers have undertaken the 30 hours of CPD contractually required of them.

Barry Lovejoy, the Head of FE at UCU, has said that the union was considering recommending a boycott on membership of the IfL. However, such a boycott would put lecturers in the position of breaking the law arising from legislation passed in 2007 which requires all FE lecturers to be registered as members with the IfL.

Tony Fazaeli, the Chief Executive of IfL has stated that costs to members would actually be lower than the proposed £68, since fees are eligible for tax relief. However, UCU has responded by pointing out that the increase in fees would see a rise in the IfL annual budget from £4.6 million (when it was funded by the government), to around £10 million (all of which would be funded by members).

HEFCE funding for universities and colleges in 2011-12

HEFCE is allocating £6,507 million to universities and colleges for the 2011/12 academic year. The allocation covers teaching, research and capital expenditure. Funding plans for the 2011/12 academic year include the following:

- £4,339 million for teaching. This is a further reduction of £180 million (4 per cent) for 2011/12. Funding for widening participation and improving retention has been maintained at current levels.
- £1,558 million for research. This is a further reduction of £17.4 million (1.1 per cent) for 2011/12. Funding is being allocated more selectively by prioritising internationally excellent and world leading research, taking account of the steer in the grant letter.
- £150 million for the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF), to enable universities and business to work more closely together. This remains unchanged.

- £30 million to be set aside for transitional funding. This will alleviate the reductions compared to 2010/11 for some institutions for one year and '*smooth the transition to the new funding environment from 2012/13*'.
- £223 million for capital funding. This is a reduction of 58 per cent compared 2010-11.

Details of the new National Scholarship Programme announced.

The government has announced details of the new National Scholarship Programme (NSP). The NSP is designed to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with help towards the cost of attending university. Around 50,000 students each year will be awarded a scholarship of at least £3,000 in tuition fee discounts and other benefits. Details of the programme include the following:

- The NSP will be available for HE students in England from autumn 2012.
- Government contributions to the fund will be £50m in financial year 2012-13, £100m from 2013-14 and £150m from 2014-15. The programme will be reviewed in 2014/15.
- The NSP is only open to students attending institutions in receipt of HEFCE funding.
- Institutions will be responsible for deciding their own eligibility criteria '*based on targeting guidance and their own circumstances*' in making individual awards to students.
- Institutions will be asked to supply '*appropriate data*' to help monitor the effectiveness of targeting the NSP grant awards.
- Each eligible student will receive a benefit of not less than £3,000, the options for which include one or more of the following:
 - A fee waiver or discount;
 - A free foundation year where leading to progression to a professional career via a course with high entry requirements;
 - Discounted accommodation or other similar institutional service; and
 - A financial scholarship/bursary – capped as a cash award at £1,000.
- For the first year the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) will have discretion over the NSP match funding level it requires through an 'Access Agreement' with the institution.

BIS publishes guidance on part time HE student loans

BIS has published a guidance note to explain the new loans for tuition scheme which will be implemented from the 2012/13 academic year for eligible part-time students in England.

Part-time students are expected to be eligible for a means-tested grant of up to £1,230 towards the cost of tuition fees, and up to £265 for other course costs. In common with full-time students, students who already hold a qualification at an equivalent or higher level, and students on post-graduate courses will not be eligible to access a student loan.

Part-time loan interest rates will be the same as loans for full-time students. Interest rates on the loan (until the student becomes liable to repay) will be RPI +3%. After that date, the interest rate will depend on income. Repayments will be at 9% of salary above the threshold of £21,000 and will be deducted by employers and HMRC alongside income tax and national insurance. Any loan balance outstanding after 30 years will be written off.

BIS guidance letter to the Director of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA)

BIS has issued a guidance letter to the Office for Fair Access asking it to be more challenging of those universities seeking to charge higher fees. The Guidance Letter sets out how the Director of Fair Access should make his assessment of Access Agreements submitted by universities wishing to charge more than £6,000.

The letter re-states the government's policy of making Britain '*a more open and meritocratic society, in which talent is not wasted*' and goes on to say that the government expects that all institutions '*including those that are highly selective*' will want to widen participation.

Where an FE college receives direct funding from HEFCE or the Department for Education for a course for which it wishes to charge a tuition rate above the basic level, then that college will also be required to produce its own Access Agreement. Where a higher education course in a college is funded through a higher education institute (HEI), the HEI should include that franchised course in its Access Agreement.

New guidance on post-16 study choices from the 'Russell Group' of universities

The Russell Group of 20 leading UK universities has published a guide to post-16 subject choices. The guide, entitled 'Informed Choices', has been produced in collaboration with the Institute of Career Guidance, and is aimed at all students in the process of considering their A-level and equivalent options.

It includes advice on the best subject combinations for particular university courses as well as advice on the best choices for those who do not know what they want to study after school and seek to keep their options open. The paper emphasises the importance of 'facilitating' subjects, such as Maths and English, which are particularly effective in increasing a student's chances of getting on to those courses.

First universities announce maximum allowed increase in tuition fees

Many of the Russell Group universities, including Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College, London, have announced their intention to raise their tuition fees to the maximum £9,000 per year. In response, OFFA is likely to insist that 10% of fees will required to be spent on supporting students from poorer backgrounds

The general rise in university tuition fees in England has resulted in increasing numbers of prospective undergraduates applying to universities in other non UK EU countries such as those in Holland and Belgium, where tuition fees can be considerably lower and have the added advantage of many courses being taught entirely in English.

In the meantime, the Scottish Parliament has resolved to maintain free university tuition for students from Scotland (and non UK EU countries).