

SECTOR DEVELOPMENTS...

THE SPRING BUDGET AND FE

The March budget statement included an announcement by the Chancellor, Philip Hammond, of a 'radical investment programme to implement the most ambitious post-16 education reforms in England since the introduction of A-levels 70 years ago'. *In addition to the £170 million for new Institutes of Technology (IoTs) previously announced as part of the 'Building our Industrial Strategy' Green Paper (and in the 'Post 16 Skills Plan')*, Mr Hammond said that an extra £500 million a year would be made available to help 'deliver in full the recommendations of Lord Sainsbury's review of vocational qualifications in England'. This, he said, 'would involve around 13,000 separate qualifications being streamlined into 15 technical routes that better suit the needs of students and businesses'. He went on to say that the government would 'work with employers and colleges to design these routes'. 'T-Levels', as they are now being referred to, will become the main technical qualifications for FE, with the hours of study for 16-19 year olds on full time vocational courses being increased by more than 50%, to more than 900 hours a year, including the provision of a high-quality industry work placement'. This, said Mr Hammond, would help 'create real parity between vocational and academic routes'. Other measures announced in the March budget include:

- The provision of maintenance *loans* to FE students on higher technical education courses at Levels 4-6 in National Colleges and in IoTs.
- 'Piloting new approaches to lifelong learning to reflect the changing nature of work', and the provision of a fund of up to £40 million 'to test different approaches to this'.
- Providing maintenance *loans* for part-time first degree-level study, and for full time and part time higher degree study up to PhD level.

More details can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spring-budget-2017-documents/spring-budget-2017>

The UK government's budget proposals only apply to provision in England. This is because the governments of other UK countries have devolved responsibility (and funding) for decisions relating to all aspects education and training provision and qualifications in their own countries.

SKILLS MINISTER FOR ENGLAND LAYS OUT 2017/18 SPENDING PRIORITIES FOR FE

Apprenticeships and Skills Minister for England, Robert Halfon, has sent his annual skills funding letter to Peter Lauener, the Chief Executive of the Skills Funding Agency SFA. Mr Lauener is also the CEO of the Education Funding Agency (EFA), and the interim CEO of the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA). Mr Halfon's letter sets out the UK government's spending priorities for the FE sector in England for 2017/18 which, as was expected, remains largely unchanged from those in 2016/17. In his letter, Mr Halfon says the UK government will be investing £1.9 billion in apprenticeship training for all ages, £1.5 billion in adult further education, and £325 million for provision at Levels 3 to 6 through advanced learner loans. A copy of the letter can be accessed at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/599089/SFA_Letter_2017-18_final.pdf

Because government spending priorities for the English FE sector in 2017/18 are largely the same as last year, Mr Halfon refers those requiring more details to his 2016/17 funding letter. This can be accessed at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/485969/BIS-15-615-skills-funding-letter-2016-to-2017.pdf

MORE ON T-LEVELS

As mentioned above, the UK government has announced that it will implement in full all the recommendations made in the Sainsbury Review of Technical and Vocational Qualifications in England. These recommendations have been encapsulated in the government's 'Post 16 Skills Plan'. The main recommendation made by the review panel was that current 'confusing array' of vocational routes and qualifications should be replaced by 15 new technical education routes. These are follows:

- Agriculture, Environment and Animal Care
- Business and Administrative
- Catering and Hospitality
- Childcare and Education
- Construction
- Creative and design
- Digital
- Engineering and Manufacturing
- Hair and Beauty
- Health and Science
- Legal, Finance and Accounting
- Protective services (police, fire, military and other uniformed services)
- Sales, Marketing and Procurement
- Social Care
- Transport and Logistics

Individual occupations will be represented within each of the new routes and new qualifications will be developed for each route that are now being referred to as 'T Levels'. The timescale for this is as follows:

- April 2018: The IfA becomes Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) and assumes overall responsibility for technical education and qualifications in England.
- October 2018: The procurement process begins for the appointment of 'single awarding bodies' for each of the new T Levels.
- February 2019: T Levels are approved for 'pathfinder' routes.
- September 2019 First teaching of 'pathfinder' routes.
- September 2020 to September 2022: Phased introduction and teaching of other routes.

A Department for Education (DfE) spokesperson said that the post-16 skills reforms in England will create 'two genuine routes of equal footing, either via the well-established academic route or the new technical skills route'. Many hope that this latest attempt at vocational education and qualifications reform, will meet with more success than previous attempts (such as the 14-19 Diploma, introduced in 2008 and phased out in 2013). A copy of the UK government's Post 16 Plan, which includes the Sainsbury review recommendations on which the plan is based can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education>

TEACHER SHORTAGES IN FE ARE 'AT CRISIS POINT'

Meanwhile, concerns are growing that a shortage of FE teachers, particularly in English and mathematics, will hamper the introduction of the new T Level technical qualifications. An Education and Training Foundation (ETF) report published earlier this month (March) reveals a 22% decrease in the number of people **studying on initial teacher education (ITE)** courses for FE between 2013/14 and 2014/15, this being the largest fall since the ETF started compiling data. (The contraction the numbers taking ITE courses for the schools' sector over the same period was less than 2%, although more recent data shows that this increased to almost 7% in 2015/16). Most of the reduction in FE ITE course recruitment was accounted for by a contraction in the numbers taking Awards, with total numbers falling to 25,970 in

2014/15 from 34,340 the previous year. There was also a significant decline in Certificates, with the numbers decreasing by more than half, from 6,250 to 2,920. The only categories showing a small rise were Diplomas, PGCEs and Cert Eds. Commenting on the contraction in the numbers undertaking FE teacher training, a spokesperson for the Association of Colleges (AoC) said 'The government has ambitious plans for technical education, but it also needs to have a workforce plan in place to attract new entrants to the FE sector'. And a spokesperson for the University and Colleges' Union (UCU) said that the contraction in numbers wanting to teach in FE had been caused by 'massive budget cuts, attacks on pensions and falling real-terms wages'. However, the deregulation recommended in the 'Lingfield Review of Professionalism in the FE sector', means that aspiring FE teachers are no longer required to have a teaching qualification, and it is unclear how this has impacted on recruitment to FE ITE courses. The ETF report can be found at:

<http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ITE-data-report-new-brand.pdf>

LONDON AREA REVIEW REPORTS ARE PUBLISHED

The DfE has now published the reports and recommendations of all London area reviews.

The South London area review report can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/south-london-further-education-area-review-report>

The West London area review report can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/west-london-further-education-area-review-report>

The Central London area review report can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/central-london-further-education-area-review-report>

The East and South East London area review report can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/east-and-south-east-london-further-education-area-review-report>

INSTITUTE FOR APPRENTICESHIPS (IFA) CHAIR & REMAINING SENIOR MANAGERS APPOINTED

Following last month's announcement of IfA board member appointments, former Barclays chief executive Antony Jenkins has been confirmed as the chair of the IfA board with effect from this April (the date when the IfA becomes fully operational). Mr Jenkins is currently chair of the charity 'Business in the Community', although he has also been the 'shadow' IfA chair since last June. The remaining IfA senior manager posts have also been filled, mainly with candidates recruited from elsewhere within the Civil Service. These are:

- Anna Osbourne, who becomes Director of Approvals
- Jayne McCann, who becomes Director of Funding policy
- Alex Wilson, who becomes Director of Data Science
- Richard Guy, who becomes Director for Strategy and Planning
- Helen Knee, who becomes Director of Corporate Effectiveness
- Tony Singleton, who becomes Director of Finance

Senior post holders recruited from outside the Civil Service are:

- Nikki Christie, currently Head of Education and Skills at British Film Institute, who becomes Director of Assessment
- Jonathan Mitchell, Deputy Head (Academic) at London Independent Forest School, who becomes Director of Apprenticeships Standards and Development.

From April 2018, the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) transforms into the 'Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education' (IfATE) and the board and senior management will assume responsibility for the oversight of the whole of vocational education and accreditation in England.

OFQUAL EXPRESSES CONCERNS ABOUT THE IFA OPERATIONAL PLAN

Meanwhile, in its response to the recently published IfA operational plan, Ofqual says that the IfA's 'responsibilities and accountabilities are blurred', and that the plan 'failed to make a sufficient distinction between the IfA's own quality assurance function and the quality assurance function of Ofqual'. Ofqual also said that the IfA plan made no reference to the 'substantial regulatory powers that are uniquely available to us (Ofqual)'. A copy of the Ofqual response can be accessed at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/595102/Ofqual_response_to_IfA_Operational_Plan.pdf

REGISTER OF APPRENTICESHIP TRAINING PROVIDERS (ROATP) IS PUBLISHED

The full list of the providers included on the new Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers has now been published. The register shows that 1,708 out of 2,327 providers (around 75%) were successful in their applications to be included on the register. Only those included on the register are eligible to deliver apprenticeships to levy-paying employers with effect from this May. However, at least 21 FE colleges have not been successful with their applications. SFA rules say that where a provider has been graded by Ofsted as 'inadequate' overall, or graded as 'inadequate' for their apprenticeship provision, they will *not* be eligible to be included on the register. But many of the colleges that failed to get on to the register were graded by Ofsted as 'good' overall and/or 'good' in respect of their apprenticeship provision, with no 'inadequate' grades. Their omission from the register is made more surprising because it appears that at least five other FE colleges (and one local authority) were successful in being included on the register, despite having been graded either as 'inadequate' overall, or 'inadequate' for their apprenticeship provision. This was despite Skills Minister for England Robert Halfon, having insisted that no inadequate college had made it on to the register. Responding to questions from angry MPs who described the exclusion of their local colleges from the register as 'inexplicable', Mr Halfon argued that all applicants had been required to 'fulfil the same criteria to get on to the register' which, in addition to the quality of their provision, also involved an assessment based on 'due diligence, financial health, capacity and capability'. He went on to say that 'if a provider does not meet these criteria, they cannot be included on the register'. He then somewhat unhelpfully pointed out that 170 other colleges had got on to the register. However, he did say that unsuccessful providers would still be able to deliver training 'through their existing contracts', and that they would also be able to apply to be included on the register again. The deadline for re-applications is 7 April, and those providers that do re-apply will be notified of the outcome of their application sometime in May. Thereafter, the register will be 'open for new applications and re-applications on a quarterly basis'. Mr Halfon also said that non-levy allocations (funding for apprentices with employers who are not required to pay the levy) will *not* be ruled out for colleges that failed to get onto the register at the first attempt. The list of providers that were successful in their applications to be included on the RoATP can be accessed at:

<https://roatp.apprenticeships.sfa.bis.gov.uk/download>

DOUBTS CAST ON USING END-POINT ASSESSMENTS AS THE ONLY FORM OF APPRENTICESHIP ASSESSMENT

Research carried out by UCL Institute of Education, and commissioned by the Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies Alliance (SEMTEA) has been published in a report entitled '*The role of qualifications and end-point assessment in apprenticeships: an international comparison*'. The report shows that England is the only one of the eight major industrial countries that were surveyed that will use only one end-point assessment (EPA) to accredit an apprentice's competence. The report, looked at how apprenticeships are delivered and assessed in England, Germany, Switzerland, France, Denmark, Austria, Alberta Canada, and the Netherlands, and says that all these countries, apart from the Netherlands, require apprentices 'to pass written examinations as well as tests of their practical competence at the end of their training'. This has led to concerns that England is 'out of step with other major economies'. In all the other countries mentioned in the report, apprentices were expected to achieve 'some form of nationally recognised and validated accreditation'.

The reason why England appears to be out of step with other major economies is that the UK government accepted the recommendation made in the 2012 Richard Review of Apprenticeships that involved the removal of the requirement for all apprenticeships to lead to the attainment of specified vocational qualifications and the introduction of EPA for all apprenticeships in England. This is a significant change to the previous continuous assessment approach that has been in use since the introduction of competence-based NVQs in the late 1980s. The research also found that England was only country where the content of an apprenticeship was set only by employers, which was also a Richard Review recommendation. The report concludes that 'if an apprenticeship is to have credibility and worth for both individuals and employers, it must end up with a recognised qualification'. This reflects the arguments made in an earlier report published by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), in which it was argued that 'taking away the requirement for apprenticeships to include a recognised qualification could harm young people who, in an increasingly volatile labour market, will need qualifications that are transferable', and which called on the UK government to 'reintroduce the requirement for a nationally recognised qualification as a part of all apprenticeships'. A copy of the SEMTA report can be accessed at:

<http://semta.org.uk/images/pdf/Role-of-Qualifications-and-End-Point-Assessment-in-Apprenticeships-March2017.pdf>

Meanwhile, as at the end of February, only 87 of the 162 new apprenticeship standards approved had an assessment body in place that could carry out EPAs, with some major assessment organisations (e.g. OCR) pulling out of conducting EPAs altogether.

SFA WARNS PROVIDERS 'NOT TO MAKE PAYMENTS TO EMPLOYERS THAT ARE CONTRARY TO POLICY INTENT'

The SFA has warned colleges and other providers against offering financial incentives to employers that are 'contrary to policy intent'. In a recent update, the SFA gives examples of such incentives, saying that they did not conform to the recently published 'Apprenticeship funding and performance management rules 2017 to 2018'. Examples of payments colleges 'must not make, or refund' to employers include:

- 'Inflating training costs to refund the employer's co-investment'
- 'Funding ineligible costs to employers as subcontractors'
- 'Claiming higher prices to fund non-English apprentices free of charge to the employer'

A copy of the SFA update (in which section 3 is of the most relevance) can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sfa-update-march-2017/update-issue-348-1-march-2017>

And a copy of the SFA apprenticeship funding rules for 2017/18 can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-funding-and-performance-management-rules-2017-to-2018>

SFA WARNS PROVIDERS 'NOT TO USE ASSOCIATE PARTNERS TO EVADE SUBCONTRACTING RULES'

A recent report of an Ofsted inspection of a large provider revealed that a significant amount of the organisation's SFA contracted provision was being delivered by an 'associate partner'. In the report, Ofsted said that this was an arrangement that had not been 'sanctioned by the SFA'. Use of an 'associate partner' involves a college or other training provider with an SFA contract being invoiced by a partner for the use of their training staff. These staff are regarded as 'associates', as if they were supplied by a recruitment agency. However, like subcontracting, the partner also recruits the learners, and they are taught on the partner's premises. The main SFA contractor might never be involved in learner recruitment, or even meet with learners. The SFA says that the use of 'associate partners' could potentially be used circumvent rules on subcontracting, not only in respect of apprenticeship funding, but also for circumventing rules on adult education and ESF funding. Colleges and training providers have now been warned by the SFA that they should 'not engage in subcontracting through associate partnerships' since this could 'potentially allow millions of pounds of public funding to be committed and spent without proper scrutiny'.

INSTITUTES OF TECHNOLOGY (IOTS) COULD BE 'WHOLLY NEW INSTITUTIONS', SAYS THE DfE

It was previously thought that the new IoTs announced recently in the *'Building our Industrial Strategy'* Green Paper would be 'based on existing institutions'. However, the DfE has now said that they *could* be based at 'wholly new institutions', and not just within existing FE providers. This, says the DfE, is because of the 'nationwide variance in skills needs and provision', and the need to 'enable bidders looking to establish an IoT to adopt models best suited to their local needs'. The DfE goes on to say that these models might include 'extending technical education provision within an existing high-performing college', or 'delivery through partnerships of FE and HE', or through 'a group of employers partnering with an education provider to create an IoT', or through 'a *wholly new institution* where there is evidence that existing providers cannot meet higher level science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills needs'.

INDEPENDENT TRAINING PROVIDERS 'COULD LEAD IOT BID CONSORTIA'

It was also unclear whether independent training providers would be able to bid for IoT funding. However, the DfE now says that IoT bids 'can be submitted by the lead partner of a consortium, which could be either be an FE college, an HE institution, a *private training provider*, an employer consortia (representing more than one employer) or by a Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) or a combined authority. The DfE also says that it expects that 'most proposals to emerge from the area review process, which has stimulated many local areas to consider how an IoT could best be established to meet their specific needs'.

NEW OFSTED CHIEF INSPECTOR SUPPORTS ALTERNATIVES TO GCSE MATHS AND ENGLISH RE-SITS

Amanda Spielman, the new Ofsted Chief Inspector for England has said that 'forcing teenagers who do not get good GCSEs in English and mathematics is causing significant problems' (which some in the FE sector might consider to be a bit of an understatement). Ms Spielman said that the policy was 'well intentioned' but questioned whether it was 'the right way forward'. She pointed out that less than one fifth of students 'achieved the required improvement in grades when they resat their GCSEs, and two thirds either did not improve on their original grade, or even saw a deterioration in their grades. She went on to say that she hoped that the government, 'while maintaining the overarching policy objective', would 'reflect on feedback from Ofsted to refine its approach to promoting vital maths and English skills'. Responding to Ms Spielman's comments, a DfE spokesperson said that 'serious consideration' was being given to the reform of Functional Skills qualifications in mathematics and English 'to ensure that they deliver the knowledge and skills that employers need, and consequently have credibility and prestige in the jobs market'.

CHARITY CALLS FOR MORE FUNDING TO HELP 16-19 YEAR OLDS GET A GOOD GCSE PASS IN MATHS AND ENGLISH

A report published by the education charity Impetus-PEF entitled *'Life after school: Confronting the crisis'* says that 'GCSE catch-up provision is not working for young people who need to improve their grades post-16, irrespective of their background'. However, the report points out that 'Amongst young people eligible for free school meals (FSM) who do not secure grade C or above at 16, only 17% go on to catch up in English by the age of 19, and just 8% catch up in maths'. In comparison, says the report 'of those that are not eligible for FSM, 25% catch up in English by age 19 and 13% catch up in maths'. The report says 'Resitting maths and English GCSEs should be a second chance for young people to succeed. Instead it has become a second chance for them to fail'. The report also acknowledges the 'enormous pressure FE colleges are under in helping young people improve their grades and calls on government to establish an 'Excellence in English and maths fund' to provide FE colleges (and schools) with an additional £935 for all students retaking English and mathematics, with one half being provided on enrolment, and one half provided on successful completion'. A copy of the Impetus-PEF report can be accessed at:

http://www.impetus-pef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2017-03-14_Impetus-PEF-Confronting-Crisis.pdf

'FE HAS BORNE THE BRUNT OF EDUCATION CUTS' SAYS INSTITUTE FOR FISCAL STUDIES (IFS)

The IFS have published a report entitled '*Long-Run Comparisons of Spending per Pupil across Different Stages of Education*'. The report says that 'despite the high profile now being given to school funding cuts, over the last 25 years the schools sector has done rather well in terms of funding per pupil' (of all ages), with spending 'set to be at least 70% higher in 2020 than it was in 1990'. By contrast, says the IFS, 16-18 funding in sixth form and FE colleges has been 'continually squeezed, with spending per pupil set to be no higher in 2020 than it was in 1990'. The report does not include data on adult further education funding, but if it had then no doubt the overall picture would have been much worse. A copy of the IFS report can be accessed at:

<https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/comms/R126.pdf>

FE HAS BEEN SUBJECTED TO 'MORE OR LESS CONTINUOUS CHANGE', SAYS THE INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT (IFG)

The IfG has published a report entitled '*All Change*' a significant proportion of which is dedicated to what it calls the 'cycle of churn in the FE sector'. The report alleges that the FE sector has not only 'been defined by more or less continuous change over the past three decades', FE has also been subjected to 'the fastest changing set of any institutional arrangements in the developed world'. The report goes on to say that 'since the early 1980s, there have been 28 major pieces of legislation related to vocational, FE and skills training, six different ministerial departments with overall responsibility for education, and 48 different secretaries of state'. The report also says that there are 'competing and often conflicting ideas about what the sector is for', that ministers have an 'excessive level of discretion to make changes to the system', and that FE institutions are not 'given the time to bed in and make progress on reforms'. The report concludes by pointing out that 'the FE landscape is set to change again with the introduction of T levels', although this time there 'is a real possibility of simplification and a stronger link to jobs actually being achieved'.

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/all-change>

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY COMMITTEE CRITICIZES INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY GREEN PAPER

The '*Building our Industrial Strategy*' Green Paper is intended to be 'at the heart of a programme to tackle low productivity and grow world-leading sectors'. However, the House of Commons Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Committee says that the paper is 'short of clarity and insight' and is 'in danger of falling short of the nation's ambition'. The Committee also accused the government of lacking 'the political will to deliver the key objectives of increasing productivity, skills, investment in infrastructure and support for research and development', and called for 'less rhetoric and more focus on specific targets'. The Committee did welcome the shift 'from short-term economic growth to longer-term planning', but recommended that 'more powers be devolved to local authorities', and for 'investment in research and development to be raised to 3% of Gross Domestic Product', (which would be almost double the present level). A spokesperson for the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy defended the Green Paper, saying that it represented 'an ambitious long-term vision for the UK that will build on our strengths as a country and deliver a high-skilled economy for the years ahead'. A copy can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/building-our-industrial-strategy>

NEW TOOL TO HELP COLLEGES PLAN CURRICULUM TO MEET LOCAL EMPLOYMENT NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), the JPMorgan Foundation and Burning Glass, (a firm providing labour market research and information), have developed 'a digital tool to help FE colleges and other providers to identify the skills employers are looking for in the local workforce'. The tool, which is called '*Where the Work is*', was created as part of a three-year collaborative project called '*New Skills at*

Work'. The partners claim that the tool will be 'invaluable in curriculum planning' and say that 'the current focus is on mid-skill, entry-level roles that require some qualification', although this will be extended in the future. The tool differentiates between those local job opportunities that require candidates to have FE qualifications and those that require HE qualifications, and helps identify which skills are over- and under-represented in a college's area, what the trends are in local employment, where the skills shortages are, and which occupations are most in demand. The '*Where the Work is*' tool (which is free of charge to use) can be accessed at:

<http://wheretheworkis.org/what-can-the-tool-show.html>

SCHOOLS TO BE FORCED TO GIVE FE PROVIDERS ACCESS TO THEIR PUPILS

An amendment to the UK government's Technical and Further Education Bill was put forward by Lord Baker and his fellow former education secretary Baroness Morris which will force all schools to give FE providers access to their pupils and was voted through in the House of Lords. The amendment was not challenged by the UK government's Undersecretary of State for the School System, Lord Nash, and his acceptance means schools will now have to ensure that a 'range of education and training providers are given the opportunity to talk directly to pupils aged between 13 and 18, to promote technical education qualifications or apprenticeships'. The amendment will require schools to prepare a policy statement setting out the way in which providers of technical education will be given access to the school. Commenting on the success of the amendment, Lord Baker said he thought that amendment was likely to 'be met with great hostility in every school in the country'. Some observers believe that Lord Baker's motive in proposing the amendment was primarily to provide an opportunity for 13 year olds to consider the option of attending a University Technical College (which have faced huge problems with recruitment) at age 14. However, the move has been welcomed by the FE sector, with some colleges apparently now re-considering their position on offering full time courses for 14-16 year olds.

FIRST SFC CONVERTS TO ACADEMY STATUS

Hereford Sixth Form College has become the first to convert to academy status. SFCs were first given the option to convert to academy status in November 2015, with one of the advantages of them doing so being that they would no longer be required to pay VAT. The option to convert to academy status is only available to an SFC through a recommendation arising from the local area review process. Hereford SFC was part of the Marches and Worcestershire review in Wave 2, which was completed last May. Around 70% of England's 93 SFCs are thought to be actively engaged in the process of converting to academy status.

MORE STUDIO SCHOOLS CLOSE

Studio schools are intended to be an alternative to mainstream education for 14-19 year olds. Like University Technical Colleges (UTCs) they claim to provide a 'work-related curriculum with pupils studying for vocational and academic qualifications, as well as work experience'. However, like UTCs, most Studio Schools are experiencing difficulties in recruiting enough pupils to make them financially viable, and some are also struggling with improving the quality of their provision. Because of this, a number have been forced to close. Some of the most recent Studio School closures are given below:

- The Future Tech Studio School in Warrington, sponsored by Warrington Collegiate, will close at the end of the academic year, after failing to attract enough pupils.
- The Shared Learning Trust in Luton, has announced that it will be closing its studio school at the end of this academic year, after no new pupils opted to enrol at the school in September 2016.
- The two Da Vinci studio schools in Hertfordshire will close at the end of the academic year, due to the 'real challenges' they have faced in recruiting sufficient pupils.
- The Rye Studio School, in East Sussex has announced that it will only offer provision for 16 to 19-year-olds from 2018/19, at which time it will re-brand itself as 'Studio 6'. The school will continue to deliver teaching to pupils who have already started courses from age 14, but not be accepting new pupils for years 10 and 12 from the next academic year.

THE SPRING BUDGET AND SCHOOLS

Budget announcements affecting the schools sector include an additional £320 million to enable the creation of a further 140 new free schools, many of which will be selective (i.e. grammar schools, of which 30 are planned to be open by September 2020), reflecting the prime minister's focus on 'providing more opportunities for bright children from poorer backgrounds'. This is in addition to the existing commitment to build 500 new free schools by 2020 to cope with the rapidly rising school age population in England. The Chancellor also outlined plans to enable poorer children to access free transport to selective schools that might be a distance from where they lived. Meanwhile, a recent National Audit Office (NAO) report says that the cost of repairing all school buildings to a satisfactory standard will cost an estimated £6.7 billion.

CHILDREN FROM WEALTHIER FAMILIES ARE OVER-REPRESENTED IN HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Analysis of DfE and Ofsted data undertaken by the social mobility charity, the Sutton Trust, suggests that poorer children in England are much less likely to gain places at the 500 top performing comprehensives (measured in terms of GCSE attainment). The research findings show that:

- The top performing 500 comprehensive schools in England continue to be highly selective, taking just 9.4% of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), and that 43% of pupils gaining places at them are from the wealthiest 20% of families.
- High attaining schools are usually located in more affluent catchment areas, with lower numbers of disadvantaged pupils.
- In these more affluent areas, 85% of schools admit a *lower* proportion of FSM pupils than the proportion of FSM pupils living in their catchment area.
- There is a house price premium of around 20% in the catchment areas of the top comprehensives. This means pupils whose families can afford to buy in these areas are more likely to get places than pupils from poorer families.
- Selective schools that control their own admissions policies (such as 'converter' academies, faith schools and single sex schools) are significantly over-represented in the top 500 schools.
- Faith schools, which make up a third of the top 500 schools, and admit pupils on religious grounds from outside their immediate neighbourhood, are particularly selective. Faith schools in the top 500 took 6% fewer FSM pupils than lived in the school's area.

A copy of the Sutton Trust research findings can be accessed at:

<http://www.suttontrust.com/researcharchive/selective-comprehensives-2017/>

DOWNTURN IN THE NUMBER OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS COMING TO THE UK TO STUDY

Figures published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show that over the last year, there has been a 14% decrease in the number of students from overseas coming to the UK to study. The decline has been most significant in respect of students from Asia, (although China and India still account for the largest number of overseas students coming to the UK to study). Curiously, the ONS data also shows a small increase in the number of study visas issued. University leaders are campaigning for students from abroad to be removed from net migration targets and warn of the 'financial risks' if overseas students are deterred from applying.

ONE IN FOUR HE STUDENTS FROM OTHER EU COUNTRIES WHO STUDY IN ENGLAND DEFAULT ON THEIR LOANS

Students from other EU countries who choose to attend English universities are given access to the same taxpayer-funded loan as British citizens. However, data provided by the Student Loans Company (SLC) in response to a Freedom of Information (FoI) Act request has revealed that around 18,600 students from other EU countries (around 25%) have defaulted wholly, or in part, on their student loans, leaving almost

£90 million in unpaid debts. The SLC says that the students who default can't be tracked because they have now returned to their home countries.

UNIVERSITIES IN ENGLAND ENCOURAGED TO DEVELOP £14,000 PER YEAR 'FAST-TRACK' TWO-YEAR DEGREES

Universities in England are being encouraged to develop 'fast-track' undergraduate programmes that will enable students to obtain a degree in two years rather than three. Although this will save students a year's living costs, universities will be able to charge them £14,000 per year. Universities Minister for England Jo Johnson, said that the new courses had 'clear advantages for the student, such as saving a year's living costs and allowing them to get into employment more quickly'. But the University and Colleges' Union (UCU) have warned that the main beneficiaries of two-year degrees would be private, for-profit providers. And a spokesperson for the Russell Group of universities said that two-year degrees would need 'careful consideration' to ensure that they did not 'negatively affect student learning, or compromise the overall undergraduate experience'. Nevertheless, a spokesperson for Universities UK said that the new two-year degrees were likely to be on offer from 2020, and that proposals were also being developed that will make it easier for students to move between universities mid-course.

'MORE SCRUTINY OF ENGLISH UNIVERSITIES' IS REQUIRED

In an interesting article published in the Guardian last month, Sonia Sodha (its author) says that English university tuition fees are now amongst the highest of any OECD country and higher than some private universities in the US, and that on average, graduates from English universities have the highest level of student loan debt of any English-speaking nation. But despite this, says Ms Sodha, English universities continue to protest that they remain hard up. For example, Chris Patten, Chancellor of Oxford University recently criticised 'the lamentable funding record of governments of every stripe' and complained that 'universities were being forced to operate on a shoestring budget'. But while every other part of the education sector in England has been, or still is, facing deep funding cuts, universities have enjoyed a 28% increase in average per-student funding due to the tripling of tuition fees and the abolition of the recruitment cap. Ms Sodha said that the 'taxpayers have funded this are in the dark about where this extra money is going', but that 'academic teaching staff don't seem to be feeling the benefit, with more than half of them employed on insecure contracts'. Neither did students since 'only one third of undergraduates in England thought that their degrees were value for money'. In her article, she also argues that the UK government appears not to have asked universities 'for anything much in return for the extra funding they receive', and that conversely, 'universities have been incredibly resistant to any suggestion that they should be more transparent about how they spend money, even arguing for exemptions from FoI legislation'.

Ms Sodha asks, if schools and colleges are expected to provide a more intensive education for much less funding (e.g. an FE college gets £4,000 a year in government funding, reducing to £3,000 a year for those aged 19+, and are subjected to being inspected and audited in every orifice to ensure that they are delivering value for money) why do universities need so much more money, and why are they not held more accountable for the way in which it is spent? A copy of Ms Sodha's article can be found at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/26/university-fees-regulator-tuition-students>

UK UNIVERSITIES 'DEPEND ON BEING ABLE TO RECRUIT STAFF FROM ABROAD'

Figures recently published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reveal that almost a third (29%) of academic staff employed in UK universities have been recruited from abroad. In some areas, such as engineering and technology, non-UK academics account for 42% of staff. The HESA data also shows that almost one in five (19%) of HE academics have been recruited from another country in the European Union, rising to 38% in the case of mathematics, physics and biology. Universities say that they 'depend on being able to recruit international staff' and that they are concerned that Brexit, and any future immigration restrictions will 'seriously impact' on their ability to do so. The HESA report can be accessed at:

<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff>

ARE WE REALLY THAT HOPELESS AT PRODUCING OUR OWN SKILLED LABOUR?

With Brexit looming, concerns are increasingly being expressed about the level of the UK's reliance on key workers from overseas. These include not only the doctors and nurses we recruit from abroad, but also skilled workers in areas such as construction, engineering, IT, hotel and catering, and social care. A shortage of teachers means that the DfE is now having to fill the gap by hiring teachers from abroad, and the HESA report (above) even seems to suggest that we are not even capable of producing enough high calibre university academics to fill the teaching vacancies in our own HE sector.

Some observers have suggested that perhaps we should make more of an effort to find out why so many other countries, many of which are much less economically developed than our own, appear to be so much better at producing not only the highly skilled and qualified labour they need, but are apparently also able to supply a significant proportion of the skilled and qualified labour that we need. They ask, for example, why we recruit almost one quarter of our doctors and one in seven of our nurses from abroad? And they ask if our vocational education and training system is so dysfunctional that it really is incapable of producing the number of bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, carers, catering and other skilled staff our economy needs? And they ask if it is really the case that our young people lack the level of literacy and numeracy, or even the basic intelligence, needed to undertake high level skills training?

Or is it because we, as a nation, are so inept at demographic forward planning, we really are incapable of forecasting a reasonable approximation the number of doctors, nurses, teachers, carers and other skilled workers we will need in the future? Or is it because too few employers have been prepared to go to the trouble and expense of training their own staff, simply because most have found it more convenient, and much cheaper to poach the skilled workers they need from abroad? Or is it just because successive UK governments have regarded public expenditure on training as a 'soft touch' for funding cuts, preferring instead to let other countries pay for the training of the skilled staff that our country needs, and which (particularly in the case of doctors and nurses) many of those countries can't really afford to lose?

AND FINALLY, ...

The construction department of a local FE college was undergoing an external verification of its level 2 roofing course. The external verifier noted that only one student on the course was female and decided to have a more detailed look at her work. As luck would have it, the student was in college on the day of his visit and so he arranged to see her in the college roofing workshop. After watching her for a time, he concluded that standard of her work was exemplary. However, he couldn't help noticing that as she was working, she was singing at the top of her voice, and that her repertoire was exclusively made up of songs such as 'It's a Heartache', 'Holding Out for a Hero' and 'Total Eclipse of the Heart'. The verifier asked her tutor why she was doing this was. The tutor, who was Scottish (for the purposes of this story), responded by saying that it was probably because he had told her that she 'had the makings of a bonny tiler'.

Alan Birks – March 2017

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