

Given below are some of the more recent developments in the wider world of FE.

FE sector developments

Improved opportunities to develop HE provision in FE colleges

There are currently around 168,000 students studying on higher education courses in 260 Further Education colleges. HE courses delivered in FE colleges are more likely to be vocational and will include foundation degrees, HND's, degrees, post graduate courses and degree equivalent professional courses.

Research recently carried out on behalf of the Association of Colleges has shown that the average debt for a student on completing a degree at a Further Education college currently stands at around £5,700, whereas the average debt for a student on completing a degree at a University is currently around £23,200. Martin Doel, the AoC CEO, has suggested that although tuition fees cap in universities is being raised to a maximum of £9000, different cost structures and teaching methods in FE meant it was likely that fees charged by colleges could be less than £5000. He went on to say that, for students undertaking HE programmes in FE colleges, this would clearly have a significant impact on the likely level of student debt on graduation.

Assuming the required quality standards can be met, the potentially lower levels of fees for HE programmes taught at FE colleges, access to student loans for part time HE students for the first time and the financial advantages of studying for a degree locally, must provide positive opportunities for the FE sector to increase the volume of HE provision being delivered by colleges.

New providers encouraged to enter the HE market

In announcing proposals for increasing university tuition fees in the wake of the Browne report, David Willetts, the Minister for Universities and Science, reiterated the support of the coalition government for an expansion of new and alternative routes to higher education, including part and full time study for a degree in FE colleges.

One example of a 'new and alternative route' to HE can be found at Methwold High School. This is a state secondary school in Norfolk that has become the first school to be accredited to offer London University external degrees. The School's Head Teacher, Ms Denise Walker, suggests that the degree in Business and Administration, which is scheduled to commence in September 2011, can be delivered by the school for tuition fees of around £2,000 per year.

A further example of a 'new and alternative route' into HE is that of BPP, a private 'for profit' training provider based in London. BPP, now called 'BBP University College of Professional Studies Ltd', was granted university status by David Willetts earlier this year and is the first privately funded university to be formed since Buckingham University was established in 1986.

Degree awarding powers sought by Edexcel

Universities are increasingly responding to caps on student numbers by withdrawing the validation of their degrees offered in FE colleges

To help fill the gap left by this, Edexcel has confirmed that it is seeking authority to provide FE colleges with their own degree accreditation. The move by Edexcel and other accreditation bodies to obtain degree awarding powers on behalf of FE colleges was seen by the AoC as being very welcome.

It is also anticipated that more FE colleges will acquire degree awarding powers in their own right, enabling them to offer local and cohesive progression routes into higher education. Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies (now renamed University College Birmingham) has already gained university status and has been given degree awarding powers. New College Durham is expected to receive degree awarding powers early next year.

Allowing FE colleges to award their own degrees, either through an accreditation body such as Edexcel, or in their own right, was described by Paul Doel, the AoC CEO, as a 'logical step' towards 'the ending of a feudal relationship with universities where the squires decide what the serfs teach'

Publication of Ofsted Report- 'Diplomas: the second year'

As the title suggests, the Ofsted report focuses on the second year of Diploma provision and covers areas including the effectiveness of Diploma consortia, an evaluation of the success of key components of the Diploma and the coherence of the Diploma programme overall.

The report found strengths in the 'principal learning' component of Diplomas, however the delivery of 'functional skills' was judged to be weak and was considered to be particularly weak when taught in a different institution to the vocational component.

Inspectors judged that students benefited from links with industry and industrial visits, but on the whole they found it difficult to make connections between the different components of the Diploma programme

Christine Gilbert, the chief inspector, said that 'the complexity of the qualification is proving a real challenge to learners and institutions'. She went on to say that 'only one third of the first cohort of learners gained a Diploma after two years' and added

that 'more needed to be done to make the teaching of the functional skills of English, Mathematics and ICT, more industry relevant and joined up with the main subject content.'

New Chief Executive Officer for LSIS

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) has appointed a new chief executive officer. The new CEO is Rob Wye, currently Director of Strategy and Implementation at the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA). Mr Wye takes over from the current CEO, Dr David Collins, on 1 January 2011

Reductions in Skills Funding Agency staffing

The SFA is to shed 260 jobs, a cut of around 15% of the total workforce, as the first step towards dealing with the implications of the cuts in funding announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). The Chief Executive of the SFA, Geoff Russell, took a pay cut of £50,000 on his previous salary of £200,000 as CEO of the LSC, when he took over the role of CEO of the SFA. But with the new CEO of the YPLA, Peter Lauener also on a similar salary, total CEO costs have increased overall when compared to the costs of a single funding body. However, the future of the YPLA (and the staff within it) is subject to review as part of the coalition government's drive to reduce the number of quangos and other public bodies.

The number of LSC staff involved in provider funding who were transferred to the SFA and YPLA earlier this year has already been halved over the last decade from around 6,000 to 3,000.

Although the scope of funding body responsibilities subsequently changed to include the funding of private providers, the earlier Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) - which the LSC replaced- had around 400 staff. This number included the FEFC inspectorate, whose duties were subsequently taken over by Ofsted.

Launch of the White Paper 'Local Growth: Realising everyone's potential'- Implications for FE

The closure of the Regional Development Agencies has now been confirmed and they are expected to cease all activity by March 2012. To compensate for this, a new and significant White Paper announces proposals for a £1.4 billion Regional Growth Fund for the three year period 2011-2014. The deployment of the fund is expected to focus on 'rebalancing the economy and promoting private sector led sustainable growth'.

The White Paper also announces proposals for the establishment of 24 Local Enterprise Partnerships to 'encourage a more responsive approach to local business'. In addition, the White Paper contains proposals for directly elected mayors in the 12 largest English Cities, and where this is the case, the Local Enterprise Partnership will be chaired by the elected mayor.

Annexe B to the White Paper outlines the role expected of colleges, private trainers and universities in the Local Enterprise Partnership area. This includes the following:

- FE colleges and private training providers will be encouraged to form self organised networks ‘...so they can engage more easily with Local Enterprise Partnerships to agree local skills priorities and how they can best be delivered’.
- Local Enterprise Partnerships will be expected ‘...to develop effective working relationships with their local FE and HE sectors and engage effectively with their network of colleges and training providers in order to agree local strategic skills priorities and how they can best be met’.
- Local Authorities are expected ‘...to include 16-19 provision in their wider education vision for their areas’. Annexe B goes on to say that in many places there are already effective 14-19 partnerships between Local Authorities and local colleges and training providers and that ‘...these might be the best place to continue to develop a shared vision of the needs of young people’.

BTEC awards combined with GCSE’s can increase earnings

Vocational courses at level 2 have often been accused of being the easy option to GCSE’s for less able students. For example, Ms Anastasia de Waal, Director of the think tank Civitas has claimed that vocational GCSE equivalents are being used by schools to ‘...baby sit weaker pupils who jeopardise A*-C GCSE targets’. Also, the Education Secretary Michael Gove has proposed removing vocational and non GCSE qualifications from school league tables because they are ‘less demanding’.

Mr. Mike Butler, the Chair of the Independent Academies Association has suggested that vocational qualifications suffer from a credibility problem, saying that ‘When you have one subject that counts for four GCSE’s you are going to have a PR problem’. (Interestingly, in arguing for greater transparency in the qualifications performance of Academies, Ms de Vaal points out that Academies use vocational qualifications at a rate equivalent to twice that of other maintained schools).

Pearson, the BTEC parent company, has now commissioned research carried out by the London School of Economics (LSE) which shows that, irrespective of the argument about the rigour of level 2 vocational qualifications compared with GCSE’s, employers appear to be willing to pay extra for recruits who have BTEC qualifications *in addition* to GCSE’s.

The independent LSE study shows that students who combined a level 2 BTEC award with 5 GCSE’s, added 5.9% on average to their earnings when compared to those students who took an all academic course. Curiously, the research also shows that those who studied for a level 2 City and Guilds award combined with GCSE’s achieved earnings which were 3% lower, and those who studied for an level 2 NVQ combined with GCSE’s achieved earnings which were 6% lower, when compared with the earnings of those who took a level 2 academic course.

The LSE research report has now been submitted as evidence to the recently commissioned review of 14-19 education chaired by Professor Alison Wolf.

Adult FE students- fees and loans proposals

The changes outlined by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, in the recent Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) introduced two funding cut off points for adult FE students.

Those aged 25 and over will lose their entitlement to free tuition fees for a first level 2 qualification. The current expectation is that these students will now have to pay half the full fees (currently equivalent to around £1,500) for a level 2 course; however the door remains open for charging full fees at some stage in the future. A slightly different age barrier will be applied to adult students studying for level 3 qualifications. In this case students aged 24 or over will now be expected to pay full fees (currently equivalent to around £3,000). However, it is currently unclear as to when these new fee levels are expected to be applied.

The impact of increased fees for adults on FE courses is intended to be ameliorated by the introduction of a student loan scheme, similar to that available to HE students. But colleges have been told that the new FE student loan scheme will not be implemented until 2013. Looking on the bright side, the delay will allow for any technical difficulties identified in the way in which the loan scheme is applied to be ironed out.

New 'all age' careers service launched

Skills Minister, John Hayes, has announced proposals for the first 'joined up' all age careers service for England. Young people age 13-19 and adults will be able to access the new service for careers advice for the first time in September 2011 and the service is expected to be fully operational by April 2012. The all age careers service will be founded on the 'core principles of independence and professionalism'.

Schools will be placed under a legal duty to secure independent careers advice for their pupils but '...will be free to decide how best to support young people to make good careers choices'. Local Authorities will continue to have a statutory duty to provide '...services to young people that enable, assist and encourage them to participate in education and training'.

In response to the recommendations of the Careers Progression Task Force, BIS and DfE officials will work with advice professionals, schools and colleges on '...how best to revitalise the professional status of careers advice'.

New endowment fund to raise standards in under performing schools

Education Secretary Michael Gove has allocated £110 million to establish a new Educational Endowment Fund (EEF) with the purpose of raising standards in under

performing schools. The idea is based on President Barack Obama's 'Race to the Top' programme. The EEF will distribute money to Local Authorities, Academy sponsors, charities and other groups that submit 'innovative proposals to improve performance in our most challenging schools'.

Those bidding for EEF funds will need to demonstrate not only how their proposals will raise attainment, but also 'how they will be held accountable for the success of their proposals'.

Joint IFL/NUS teaching and learning campaign

The Institute for Learning (IfL) and the National Union of Students (NUS) have launched a joint campaign to 'highlight the value of brilliant teaching in further education and skills'. A teaching and learning Facebook page has been created which invites students and teachers to share their views on '....what makes a brilliant teacher'.

The IfL is also calling on the coalition government to establish a committee of enquiry into 'world class teaching and training in further education and skills'.