Sector Developments

Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet changes
As part of the Prime Minister's Cabinet reshuffle:

- Matthew Hancock, the former Parliamentary Under Secretary for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning (to use the full title) has been promoted to Minister of State for Skills and Enterprise within the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Mr Hancock still holds responsibility for FE within his extended portfolio.
- Esther McVey has been appointed as Minister for Employment within the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). Ms McVey will be the minister who liaises with Mr Hancock in respect of the provision of skills training for unemployed people.

And on the Labour benches:

- Tristram Hunt has been promoted to Shadow Secretary of State for Education.
- Rushnara Ali (who is a former student of Tower Hamlets College) has replaced Mr Hunt as the Shadow Further Education and Skills Minister.
- Liam Byrne has been appointed Shadow Universities, Science and Skills minister. Although there is no mention of this by name in his new title, Mr Byrne also has responsibility for further education.

Further 'downsizing' at the Skills Funding Agency (SFA)

Three directors and a chief information officer have been amongst the first to be made redundant as part of the latest round of job cuts at the SFA, thereby halving the size of the agency's executive management team. By next April, the total number of other senior managers at the SFA will have been reduced from 36 to 23. Further job cuts are believed to be in the pipeline at other levels in the SFA that could affect up to a further 1000 staff.

SFA offers unpaid traineeship

The SFA has been criticised for advertising an unpaid 6 month, 21 hour per week traineeship in business administration on the national apprenticeship vacancy website. In response, a spokesperson for the SFA said 'there is no expectation for employers to pay young people taking part in traineeships' adding that young people undertaking a work placement as part of a traineeship, 'were exempt from any national minimum wage entitlement'. Perhaps going on to labour the point a bit, the spokesperson went on to say that the advertisement had 'made it clear that the role was unpaid', and that the SFA had warned candidates that the agency 'could not guarantee that the trainee would be offered an apprenticeship, or a job when the traineeship ended'.

Traineeships allocated an extra £20 million

When it was launched in January this year, participation in the government's traineeship scheme was restricted to 16-18 year olds. However, in June the government decided to extend the scheme to 19-23 year olds. In response to the Prime Minister's new policy directive that all 16-25 years olds are expected to be either learning or working, Skills and Enterprise Minister, Matthew Hancock, has announced that an extra £20 million is to be made available for traineeships for 19-23 year olds. The extra funding has been welcomed, but concerns have been expressed that no extra cash is being made available for traineeships for 16-18 year olds. A spokesperson for BIS said that the additional traineeship funding would be 'available to eligible providers of all types, including colleges and private training organisations'. When questioned on the source of the new funding, the BIS spokesperson explained that the extra cash had been made available from funds 're-prioritised from existing budgets outside of the adult skills budget', but when pressed to do so, seemed to be reluctant to say exactly which budgets the extra funding had come from.

Apprenticeships Pay Survey reveals that underpayment of apprentices is increasing

As reported in last month's ***Click*** newsletter, the Low Pay Commission (LPC) has published a report which says that in 2012 around 27% of apprentices were paid less than their applicable national minimum wage (NMW). This is an increase of 7% compared with the position in 2011. The LPC report goes on to say that, within the overall figures for 2012, around 40% of all 16 and 17 year old apprentices, and 25% of all 18 to 20 year old apprentices were paid less than their applicable NMW. The LPC's findings have now been corroborated by data in the BIS 2012 Apprenticeship Pay Survey. The BIS data suggests that around 30% of apprentices were paid less than their applicable NMW in 2012 compared with 20% the year before. The data also shows that the average amount of time apprentices spent in undertaking 'off the job' training has fallen from 6.3 hours per week in 2011 to just under 5 hours per week in 2012, and that the amount of 'on the job' training has also fallen from 12.4 hours per week in 2011 to 11.6 hours per week in 2012.

The TUC General Secretary, Frances O'Grady has now called for an investigation into what she describes as the 'exploitation of apprentices' by some employers, saying that 'many apprentices are currently seen as little more than cheap labour'. Ms O'Grady went on to say the situation 'is getting worse across the board' and that in some industries, such as hairdressing (where 69% of apprentices were underpaid), 'abuse has become endemic'. In an attempt to address the problem, the government has announced that it intends to make it easier to 'name and shame' those employers that pay less than the legally required NMW (including that paid to apprentices). Employers found doing so will also face financial penalties of up to £5,000 per employee. The Minister for Skills and Enterprise, Matthew Hancock, has now written to every apprentice telling them what they should be earning. Providers will be expected to distribute Mr Hancock's letter to all of their apprentices starting this month (October). In the meantime, hundreds of advertisements for apprenticeships offering less than the applicable NMW (currently £2.68 for 16-18 year olds) are still being advertised on the government funded national apprenticeship vacancy website.

Fall in 16-18 apprenticeship starts

Data recently published by BIS has revealed that there were 14,600 fewer 16-18 apprenticeship starts in 2012/13, than in 2011/12. This represents a year on year contraction of 12%. Over the same period there was also a reduction of 7,400 in the number of starts for apprenticeships of all ages, representing an overall contraction of 1%. The new shadow skills minister, Liam Byrne, has questioned Matthew Hancock about the contraction, with Mr. Hancock responding that the reduction in starts was partly explained by the 'robust action' the government had taken to prevent poor quality providers from delivering apprenticeships.

Implementation of the Richard Review 'The Future of Apprenticeships in England'

The Richard Review is one of numerous reviews of apprenticeships that have been commissioned by the government in recent years. However, it is claimed that the Richard Review is different from the others, since its recommendations propose a 'radical change' in the way in which apprenticeships are delivered and funded. Because of the significance of this, BIS consulted extensively on which of the recommendations made in the review should be accepted. BIS then consulted on how the recommendations that had been accepted should be implemented. BIS then consulted on which method should be used to make payments to those employers that took on apprentices (with the smart money being on some form of tax credit being the preferred option). Although this latest consultation period ended on 1 October, BIS announced that 'no decision would be made until later in the year. This led many to believe that BIS might have decided to conduct a further consultation on the effectiveness of earlier consultations, which in turn might have led to a further review to ascertain whether additional consultations (or reviews) were required. However, much to most people's relief (short lived though it may prove to be) BIS has now published a document called 'The Future of Apprenticeships in England Implementation Plan'. The plan basically outlines how those of the recommendations made in the Richard Review, on which key stakeholders were in broad agreement, will be put into effect, and includes the following:

- In the period up to 2017/18, current apprenticeship frameworks will be gradually phased out and will be replaced by new frameworks based on 'standards designed by employers'. As these new employer designed standards are developed and agreed, the government will cease to fund apprenticeships that are still delivered through existing frameworks.
- Employers will assume the lead role in assessment, which will be 'rigorous', 'independent' and 'focused primarily on testing the competence of apprentices at the end of their apprenticeship'. Standards obtained on completion of an apprenticeship will be graded as either 'pass', 'merit' or 'distinction'.

- The first phase of employer designed apprenticeships will consist of 8 sector-based 'Trailblazer' projects. The sectors include areas as diverse as financial services, food and drink industries and aerospace, with the projects being part funded through Lord David Sainsbury's Gatsby Foundation.
- All apprenticeships will be required to be for a minimum duration of 12 months. There will be no exceptions to this (e.g. for prior attainment).
- At least 20% of an apprenticeship will consist of off the job training. As yet unspecified 'mechanisims' will be put in place to enforce this.
- The enhanced English and mathematics requirements within apprenticeships 'will be stepped up gradually'.
- There will be a new 'National Apprenticeship Council', the membership of which will be comprised of apprentices elected by their peers

Commenting on the plan, Skills Minister, Matthew Hancock, perhaps somewhat ominously said that he saw it as 'a blueprint for wider reform in vocational education'

Education and Training Foundation (ETF) revises its policy on competitive tendering

The fledgling ETF has recently been criticised for awarding contracts without going through any form of competitive tendering process. As a result of this, the ETF board has resolved that from now on, all contracts awarded will be subject to competition. However, there will be exceptions to this. These exceptions include the contracts already issued to ETF member organisations such as the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), which gave rise to the criticism in the first place, and contracts 'for the continuation of programmes previously funded by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), and by BIS'. In announcing the change in policy, Peter Davies (who recently replaced Sir Geoff Hall as ETF interim Chief Executive) said that the ETF would '*not* be able to proceed with any of the other bids for work the foundation has received from across the sector' and acknowledged that this meant that 'time would have been wasted' by applicants. The ETF is now inviting competitive tenders from interested organisations and individuals to:

- Lead a consultation process to inform the review of professional standards in FE.
- Establish the set of professional standards in the wake of the above review.
- Develop guidance for teachers and trainers in FE on the use of the professional standards established.
- Design and deliver a consultation process regarding a workforce survey, to ensure that this meets the data and reporting needs of the sector.
- Develop support programmes for traineeship providers.

Changes at the ETF

Meanwhile, David Russell, a senior civil servant and policy director at the Department for Education (DfE) with responsibility for 'vocational education reform and closing attainment gaps' will be replacing Mr Davies as the ETF's first substantive chief executive. At the same time, Paul Mullins will become chairman of the ETF Board, replacing David Hughes, the current interim ETF chairman. Mr Mullins is a mergers and acquisitions adviser for a number of companies including Schroders, Citigroup, Bank of America and DC Advisory. He is also chair of the BIS sponsored Industrial Development Advisory Board.

Support for FE Lecturers to teach English and Mathematics

The government has announced that young people aged 16-18 will no longer be able to stop studying mathematics or English unless they have achieved at least a GCSE grade C or equivalent in these subjects. The new policy will mean that FE colleges will be required to teach mathematics and English to thousands more students. To assist colleges to prepare for this, the DfE is funding an English enhancement programme to help FE lecturers teach the subject at GCSE level. The new course is being developed in partnership with the ETF and the Association of Centres for Excellence in Teacher Training (ACETT). The ETF has also announced that it will be allocating funds to subsidise 'up-skilling' courses for FE lecturers wanting to enhance their ability to teach GCSE mathematics.

New 16-18 'core mathematics' qualifications to be introduced in England

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Childcare, Elizabeth Truss, has announced proposals for the development of a new core mathematics qualification to be offered in colleges and schools in England in 2016. The new qualification will be targeted at those students who have achieved a grade B or grade C in GCSE mathematics, but who drop the subject afterwards. It will also enable those students with a GCSE A* and A grade in mathematics, who are not taking GCE A level or AS level mathematics, to continue to study the subject at a higher level. The new qualification can also be used to fulfill the mathematics element of the Technical Baccalaureate (TechBacc) which is scheduled to be introduced in England from September 2014.

From 2014 to 2016, the DfE will be spending around £20 million supporting the development of the new core mathematics qualification, and an 'expert panel', convened by the Advisory Committee in Mathematics Education (ACME) will publish guidelines on what the course content should cover. This is likely to include topics such as 'statistics, probability, advanced calculation and mathematical modeling'. The course is also expected to 'develop students' mathematical thinking and problem-solving skills'. The proposed new qualification is the latest development in the government's 'top to bottom overhaul' of mathematics in schools and colleges, ranging from the introduction of a 'rigorous new primary curriculum from age 5 onwards', through to a 'fundamental reform' of mathematics at GCSE, GCE A level and AS level.

Colleges accused of allowing young people to 'give up' English and mathematics

Figures recently published by the DfE show that around 75% of students who achieved a GCSE grade D in mathematics, and around 67% who those who achieved a grade D in English, were not re-entered for the examination at a later stage in their studies. A DfE spokesperson said that the figures 'underlined why the government now insisted all post 16 education providers must teach English and mathematics to young people who fail to achieve C grades in these subjects. In reaction to the DfE findings, David Laws, the Liberal Democrat Schools Minister, accused colleges in England of allowing learners to 'give up' mathematics and English. Mr Laws went on to say that 'with just a bit more teaching, these students could have achieved the grades that would make all the difference to their job prospects'. However, it seems that Mr Laws offered no comment on the apparent inability of secondary schools to increase the numbers of pupils obtaining grade Cs or above in English and mathematics at age 16 (which of course, would substantially help to alleviate the problem for colleges).

It is true to say that, over the last few years, many FE colleges have ceased to offer GCSE retake courses. Because the pass rate on these courses was so low, colleges have been understandably concerned about the negative impact these low pass rates might have on Ofted inspection outcomes. A spokesperson for the AoC defended the FE sector, saying that it was wrong 'to imply learners in colleges were no longer studying English and mathematics' and went on to say that 'level 2 qualifications in English and mathematics can be obtained through alternative routes, for example, through functional skills'. The spokesperson added that the new 16-18 funding methodology 'makes this a priority for colleges, which is why they are taking action across a broad front, including recruiting, re-deploying and retraining teachers'.

New School League Tables to be introduced in England

Education Minister, David Laws, has announced that new secondary school league tables are to be introduced in England from 2016. The proposed new format is apparently intended 'to discourage an over emphasis on those pupils achieving C grades at GCSE'. Mr Laws argues that the because current tables focus on the numbers of pupils gaining 5 GCSEs at grade A* to C, 'a disproportionate amount of attention is paid to pupils on the GCSE C/D grade borderline, to the detriment of pupils who achieve much higher or lower level grades'. He also argues that the current tables 'conceal the performance of coasting schools, rewarding them with artificially high positions in the league tables'.

Therefore, from 2016, a pupil's performance will be measured on his or her overall results across eight GCSE subjects, including English and mathematics, with the other 6 subjects being drawn from a list of 'more demanding' GCSEs (e.g. science and languages). Each pupil's results will be aggregated into an average grade for the school. There will also be a measure of progress, showing how pupils at the school have advanced since taking tests at the end of primary school. These will also be aggregated and expressed as a score showing how much the school's results vary above or below expected levels. If the school achieves their expected levels, they will score zero. If the results are better than expected, they will receive a positive score (e.g. +0.4) and if they are below expected levels, they will be given a minus score (e.g. -0.3). Mr Laws has defined a new minimum level of performance as being 'progress that was half a grade lower than reasonable expectations' (i.e. -0.5 or more). However, if a school achieves a score equivalent to a full grade above expectations (i.e. +1.0 or more), they will be spared an Ofsted inspection the following year. At present there are 195 schools performing below the minimum performance level, but Mr Laws says that 'if the new tables were to be applied to current school performance, the number of underperforming schools would double'.

New post 19 performance measures to be introduced in England

BIS and the DWP are jointly developing a new set of performance measures to be applied to post-19 provision. The new measures will focus on progression into further learning and employment and subsequent changes in earnings. The first set of experimental data will published in July 2014 and will be introduced for all providers in 2016. The data set will include:

- Numbers of unemployed learners moving into employment
- All learners moving into employment
- All learners moving into further learning
- All learners moving/staying in employment and or further learning (an aggregate of the above 2 measures)
- Learners' progression in work
- Change in learners' earnings

Young people from England perform poorly in OECD literacy and numeracy tests.

A major study recently carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that the numeracy and literacy skills of 16-24 year olds in England are falling well behind those of young people in other developed countries. The OECD study involved a sample of 166,000 young people and adults aged between the ages of 16 and 65, drawn from 24 countries (with a combined total population of 724 million) taking numeracy and literacy tests. The sample included 9,000 young people and adults from England and Northern Ireland, (Scotland and Wales were not involved in the study). The tests focused on the ability to use literacy and numeracy skills in a practical setting, rather than on formal qualifications obtained. In relation to England and Northern Ireland, the OECD data revealed the following:

- Extrapolation of the data suggests that, in England and Northern Ireland, there are as many as 8.5 million adults with numeracy skills, and 5.8 million adults with reading skills, that are no better than that which would be normally be expected of a child aged 10.
- With reference to 16-24 year olds, England is ranked 22nd for literacy and 21st for numeracy out of 24 developed countries. The highest performing countries were Japan (where secondary school pupils performed better than university graduates in England), Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands. Young adults in Northern Ireland performed better in the tests than young people in England, but they were also in the bottom half of the rankings.
- In most developed countries, the norm was for younger people to perform considerably better in the tests than older people. However, 16-24 year olds in England were the only young people in the sample that actually performed worse than those in the 55-65 age range.
- Although young people in England tended to have more qualifications than older people, the test results indicated that younger people have less ability to use numeracy and literacy skills in a practical setting than older people who left school with few, if any qualifications. This suggests that in England, obtaining qualifications does not always lead to the acquisition of better skills. The poor performance of young

people relative to older people is also thought to help explain why, after the financial crash and recession of 2007/08, unemployment in England increased much more significantly amongst younger people than it did amongst older people.

The OECD report goes on to suggest that levels of social mobility in England are low compared to other developed countries, with 16-24 year olds having the lowest level of social mobility. The data from across the study shows that if a young person's parents had low levels of education themselves then they were five times more likely to have poor proficiency in literacy and numeracy than those whose parents had higher levels of education. However, in England this factor increases to 8 times, suggesting that a child born in poverty in England is much more likely to remain in poverty. These findings appear to have been corroborated in the recent report of the Commission on Child Poverty and Social Mobility (see the section below).

The OECD's dismal conclusion is that the stock of skills available in England and Northern Ireland is 'bound to decline over the next decade unless significant action is taken to improve skills proficiency'. Presumably in an attempt to put us on the right path, the OECD has drawn attention to data that shows that where employers have had more involvement with what is taught in schools, colleges and universities, both skills attainment and economic performance improve. This is appears to be a view shared by most employer organisations in England, with John Allan of the Federation of Small Businesses, saying 'The OECD report highlights what our members have been telling us, which is that young people just don't have the literacy and numeracy skills to do the job properly'.

Perhaps we do have a problem. An article with the headline *'Price of chocolate to triple'* was published in the October 8 issue of the Daily Telegraph. The article reported that *'The price of chocolate in Britain could be set to increase by a third by Christmas'*.

Commission on Child Poverty and Social Mobility

The all party Commission on Child Poverty and Social Mobility, chaired by the former Labour Health Secretary, Alan Milburn, has published a report that says, 'in Britain, poverty is increasing and social mobility is decreasing'. The report goes on to say that 'being born poor often leads to a lifetime of poverty', (with living in poverty being defined as living in a household where income that is less than 60% of the national median income). The report warns that social mobility is 'flat-lining and could go in to reverse, with the young paying the highest price' and that, 'with rising prices and falling wages, being in work is no guarantee of escaping poverty'. The Commission called for 'higher minimum wages and more universal help so poor working families can get help as well as those out of work'. The Commission also argues that 'current policies are likely to be insufficient to address unacceptably high levels of youth unemployment'.

Presumably not wanting to pass up an opportunity to do a bit of 'FE bashing', the Commission has attacked the college sector, pointing out that Ofsted inspection data showed 'that 1.5 million learners in the post 16 further education and skills sector were in provision that was rated less than good'. As a result, one of the Commission's 10 key recommendations is that FE colleges 'should in the future, be paid by the results they achieve for their students in the labour market and not just for the numbers they recruit'. Interestingly, the report also recommends that the government should introduce 'a payment for young people conditional on their participation in high quality work-related support and educational programmes'. The funding for this payment would be 'diverted from the Bursary Fund, from Child Benefit for 16 and 17 year olds and from the Jobseeker's Allowance for young people aged 18 and over'. Anybody would think that the Commission was recommending the re-introduction of Educational Maintenance Allowances (in England that is, because they are still available elsewhere in the UK). The Commission's apparent disdain for FE is surprising since it would seem to contradict the otherwise widely held view that FE colleges make a very significant contribution to social mobility, particularly for those young people who have not benefited much from their formal schooling and for unemployed adults who need to improve their skills in order to re-enter the labour market.

Lord Baker proposes the introduction of 'Career Colleges'.

From September of this year, FE colleges have been able to recruit 14-16 year olds onto full time courses. The former Conservative Education Secretary, Lord Baker has seen this as providing him with an opportunity to introduce his ambitious plans for 40 new 'Career Colleges' to be established over the next 4 years. The features of a 'Career Colleges' include the following:

- Career Colleges will be established by FE colleges as subsidiary organisations with charitable status
- An FE college wishing to establish a Career College must have been graded as good or better by Ofsted
- The Career College must be located in a geographically separate building, with its own head
- Between 1 and 3 vocational subjects will be offered linked to local and regional labour market needs
- Employers will be partners in designing and delivering the curriculum
- Career College boards will be accountable to the governing body of the FE College
- A minimum of 40% of Career College board members will be local or regional employers
- Career Colleges will be funded 'in line with current FE funding arrangements'

Lord Baker says that the curriculum taught in a Career College would include subjects 'such as hospitality, tourism, finance, health and care and construction'. This has prompted some observers to suggest that Career Colleges seem to be a lot like the University Technical Colleges (UTCs) which were also his creation. However, Lord Baker has made it clear 'there is a very clear demarcation line between the two' and has explained that 'UTCs are for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects and Career Colleges are for non-STEM subjects'. Observers will no doubt be mightily relieved to hear this.

Minister proposes new College Group

The '157 Group' of colleges and the 'Gazelle Group' of colleges have now been joined by the newly formed 'Premier Group' of colleges. The Premier Group of colleges has been defined as 'a select group of 20 of the UK's leading and highly responsive colleges and a university, with vocational education and training at the heart of their businesses'. As a clear statement of intent, the Premier Group of colleges is collectively sponsoring next month's Skills Show at the National Exhibition Centre. However, it appears that Skills and Enterprise Minister, Matthew Hancock, is considering encouraging the formation of yet another college group that would be called the 'Elite Group' of colleges. The Elite Group of colleges would be comprised of 'the best performing FE colleges' with advanced specialisms and close links with industry. In a recent speech at the Edge Foundation, Mr. Hancock said that 'Elite Colleges would become leaders in their communities', and would also 'lead the nation, and indeed lead the world', in their own specialist areas.

Sixth Form Colleges may soon be allowed to recover VAT

Amongst the all too frequent anomalies found in the English education system is the fact that England's 93 sixth form colleges are required to pay VAT on goods and services, whereas schools and academies are exempt. The Sixth Form Colleges' Association (SFCA) claims that the anomaly costs their member colleges around £30 million each year and places them at a competitive disadvantage with schools and academies, (for example in respect of being able to afford to offer minority subjects, such as modern foreign languages). As a result of this, a cross party group of 74 MPs, each of whom has a sixth form college in their constituency, has called on the government to end the anomaly and for sixth form colleges also to be allowed to recover VAT payments. In response to this, the Prime Minister has pledged to 'look carefully at the issue'. Also, a spokesperson for the DfE said that the Department was 'looking into whether funding arrangements should be reviewed'. Perhaps eventually this might be extended to FE colleges.

Lack of regulation could lead to risk of falling standards in England's universities

Universities have already been accused of engaging in 'grade inflation' because of the seemingly ever-increasing proportion of first and upper second class honours degrees being awarded. (In 2011/12, for example, 64% of all degrees awarded were first or upper second class honours degrees). Now the Higher Education Council (HEC), an independent body made up of representatives from the HE sector in England, business and the three main political parties, has added its concerns about threats to standards in HE and has commissioned research which shows that there is 'insufficient regulation of the HE sector' in England.

The HEC goes on to argue that 'current checks are not adequate', that 'a more robust, but proportionate' regulatory system is needed' and that without this being in place 'the UK's higher education reputation is under threat'. The HEC's main concerns are twofold:

- Firstly, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which distributes public funding to English universities, was previously able to attach regulatory conditions to the grant awarded. But since 2012, the level of public funding universities receive has been reduced and has been replaced by income received from increased student tuition fees. As a result of this, the HEFCE's ability to regulate universities through the exercise of funding sanctions has been correspondingly reduced.
- Secondly, there has been a rapid expansion in the number of new HE providers, including online providers, entering the UK higher education market. The HEC says that current regulation 'is not adequately prepared for the diversity of these developments' and that 'new market entrants are not facing the level of scrutiny that they should'.

Recommendations made by HEC for addressing these issues include the following:

- Legislation should urgently be introduced to establish a new overarching regulatory body, to be called the 'Council for Higher Education (CHE'). This new regulatory body would be comprised of the HEC, HEFCE, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), the Student Loans Company (SLC) and a completely new body called the Office for Competition and Institutional Diversity (OCID).
- In addition to the exercise of regulatory powers in respect of existing HE providers, the new body would also assume responsibility for monitoring the quality of provision of new entrants to the HE market.
- Better information should be made available about all of the various degree providers now operating in the HE market, with kite marks awarded to those that met CHE approved standards.
- An insurance scheme should be introduced, that should be paid into by every HE institution in order to safeguard students' interests, should an institution or course fail.

Vice Chancellor of Oxford University calls for the upper limit for HE fees in England to be scrapped

Meanwhile, the Vice Chancellor of Oxford University, Professor Andrew Hamilton, has questioned the viability of retaining the current £9,000 upper limit for annual HE tuition fees in England and has argued that 'different types of institutions should be able to charge different levels of fees'. He also questioned how there could be 'a meaningful market for HE, if everything, regardless of content and quality, was the same price' and that what was needed was a 'system of tuition charges that was more closely related to the true cost and to the quality of what was on offer'. Professor Hamilton complained that Oxford University was currently faced with an annual funding gap of £70 million saying that the reason for this was that 'the cost of teaching undergraduates was closer to £16,000'. He went on to argue that 'there needed to be a more sustainable funding model for those universities where £9,000 did not cover costs', otherwise, Oxford university 'could not be expected compete on an international stage with better funded rivals'

Cynics have put forward various solutions to Professor Hamilton's problems. These include dipping into the university's private endowments that, according to Wikipedia, stood at around £3.9 billion at the end of 2011, selling off some of the valuable fine wine owned by the university which is said to stored in around 3 miles of wine cellars under university buildings, or taking stuffed swan off the menu at High Table. However, a more interesting suggestion is that Oxford (and universities like Oxford) should become completely private, (a bit like Pearson College, which advertises itself as being 'part of the only FTSE 100 company to design and deliver degrees'). Because the university would receive no state funding, there would be no requirement for tuition fee caps and the university could charge what it liked. Nor is it likely that much higher fees would result in a shortage of applicants for places at the university. After all, the majority of the students attending Oxford come from public schools and parents used to paying school fees of up to £20,000 a year (or even more for the most exclusive public schools) probably think that compared to this, stumping up a mere £9,000 a year for their offspring to attend Oxford University is a bit of a snip. And looking on the bright side, any public money saved as a result of the privatisation of top universities could be used to improve access to state funded universities young people from less well-off backgrounds, or might even be used to help restore Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) for disadvantaged 16-18 year olds in England.

'Faith' Free Schools controversy

Many of the new Free Schools that have been established are 'faith schools'. The government appears to have been surprisingly reluctant to provide information on exactly how many faith Free Schools there are, with the reason given by Education Secretary, Michael Gove being that he wants 'to protect public-spirited volunteers from intimidation' and to allow them to establish Free Schools 'without fear of reprisal or backlash'. This apparent reluctance led to a freedom of information request being lodged by the Guardian newspaper, the AoC and the British Humanist Association (BHA). The government's response to the request reveals that in the first 2 'waves' of applications to establish Free Schools, 132 (or 26% of the total) were for schools that have 'a religious character'. Commenting on the findings, a spokesperson for the BHA has argued that the actual number of faith based Free Schools is likely to be much higher than this, because the data provided by the government only includes schools 'with a specifically designated religious character', and does not include those with a 'faith ethos'. The BHA's claim appears to be supported by an article published in the Independent newspaper on 20 October, which reports that, 'since 2010, around half the applications to set up Free Schools have come from religious groups'.

One of the new faith Free Schools is the Al-Madinah School in Derby. The school's website says that it is a 'Muslim ethos, all-through school'. 'All through' means that pupils of all ages, from reception to sixth form, are all taught in the school. The school is ostensibly open to pupils of all faiths, and has an opt-out choice for parents who do not want their children to take part in Muslim religious activities. However the school's curriculum includes Islamic Studies, Qur'an reading, translation of the Qur'an and Qur'an memorisation, along with daily Muslim prayers. Prior to the school's establishment, Ofsted met with the trust that would oversee the school. The trust promised to encourage tolerance and respect, but insisted that books and other resources used in delivering the curriculum would be 'required to conform to the teachings of Islam' and that any learning resources considered 'potentially blasphemous' would be removed.

The government nevertheless approved the trust's application, public funding was agreed and the school was opened. However, concerns began to be expressed at an early stage and, as a result, the school was the subject of an Ofsted inspection. On the first day of the inspection the school was closed, with 'health and safety issues' being given as the reason. Ofsted later released a statement that said records showing whether staff were cleared to supervise children 'were either missing or incomplete' and that the school would remain closed until inspectors were able 'to satisfy themselves that the necessary safeguarding arrangements were in place'. The school reopened one week later. A full Ofsted inspection has now taken place, and inspectors have judged the school as being 'dysfunctional', 'in chaos' and 'inadequate in every respect'. The school is also the subject of two further investigations, one by the Investigations and Audit Division of the DfE and another by the External Assurance team of the Education Funding Agency.

In the meantime, Lord Nash, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools has written to the chair of governors saying that funding will be withdrawn unless the trust:

- Provides a list of all staff employed by the trust, along with their qualifications and evidence that safeguarding checks have been completed. (It was alleged that many staff had not been checked and that a significant number of staff did not have 'appropriate qualifications').
- Confirms that the school is now in full compliance with equality legislation in respect of practices and procedures where girls and boys are separated and/or treated differently.
- Notifies staff that they were not required to cover their hair if this is contrary to their religion or beliefs.
- Demonstrates that the school curriculum is sufficiently broad and balanced.
- Explains how the school will ensure that it is welcoming and attractive to students of all faiths, and those of no faith.

The rapid expansion of faith-based Free Schools inevitably draws attention to the fine dividing line between the teaching of theology and the teaching of ideology and dogma. It also calls into question the extent to which the segregation of children by faith can hinder integration and social cohesion. There are a large number different religions (and even sects within the same religion) being practiced in the UK today. Many have strict rules on such things as what food can be eaten and when it can eaten, how a person should dress, how or whether they should cut their hair, or whether they can be allowed a blood transfusion. Others have strong beliefs about such things as creation, homosexuality, space aliens, polygamy, sacred underpants, contraception, pre-pubescent genital mutilation and the role of women in society. These belief sets can, and often do, permeate the curriculum delivered in faith schools. Critics argue that because the religious teaching of one faith is often at odds with the religious teaching of others, this can be a virulent source of discord and social fragmentation. Professor Ted Cantle, of the Institute of Community Cohesion has added his concerns saying that 'the segregation of children on the basis of faith has resulted in the increasing Balkanisation of educational provision'. In addition to this, research published earlier this month (October) by the BHA, shows that the most racially segregated schools are likely to be those set up by minority religious groups, and that this was becoming 'more and more prevalent'.

The severity of funding cuts to other key public services inevitably also draws attention to the increasing levels of government spending on the set up and running costs of Free Schools, and in particular faith Free Schools, and whether this represents the best value for public money in terms of providing education. Critics argue that public funds should be used to provide good schools for all children, and should offer a broad and balanced curriculum, and should *not* be used to finance the promulgation (and in some cases the proselytisation) of particular faiths. They suggest that parents who want to send their children to a religious school should perhaps be expected meet the cost themselves. Also, since many churches are very wealthy, (for example, the Bishop of Limburg in Germany recently spent 31 million Euros renovating his diocesan home) they also argue that these churches should be expected to make more of a contribution to the cost of religious education in their own particular faith. Nevertheless, a further 20 faith Free Schools, financed entirely through public funds, will open in September 2014, with more planned to follow.

Mind you, I'm pretty sure that I once saw the face of Professor Richard Dawkins on a piece of toast.

Deputy Prime Minister weighs in on Free Schools

The Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, seems to be distancing himself from the apparently unfettered growth of Free Schools by suggesting that there was 'no point in having a national curriculum if only a few schools are required to teach it'. He has also suggested that it would be a good idea if all teachers in Free Schools were actually qualified to teach. You could see how this could be a bit upsetting for his coalition partners, since neither of these requirements is currently applicable to Free Schools. The next thing you know, someone will be questioning where the money for all these new Free Schools is coming from.

And finally…

Three vice principals and three directors of finance from different colleges in the Midlands arranged to travel together by train to a conference in London. The topic for the conference was 'Coping with government cuts to college funding'. At the station, the three vice principals each bought a ticket, but then watched in surprise as the three directors of finance bought only one ticket between all three of them. 'How are you going to get away with travelling with only one ticket?' asked a bemused vice principal, 'Watch and you'll find out', answered one of the directors of finance. They all boarded the train together and took seats next to each other. Part of the way into the journey, one of the finance directors spotted the conductor in the next carriage checking tickets. All three finance directors quickly got up from their seats, crammed themselves into a nearby toilet and closed the door behind them. The conductor entered the carriage where they had been sitting and started checking passengers' tickets. As the conductor passed the toilet, he knocked on the door and said, 'Tickets please!' The toilet door opened just a crack and an arm emerged with a ticket in hand. The conductor checked the ticket and moved on down the train. All three finance directors then emerged from the toilet and took their seats again 'See!' said one of the finance directors to the vice principals, 'that's how you save money for your college'.

The three vice principals were initially shocked by this, since it was risky, to say nothing of being blatantly illegal. However their college budgets were so severely stretched, they agreed it might be worth trying. So after the conference, the vice principals decided that they would use only one of their return tickets for all three of them and that they would share the refund for the other two return tickets. However, they were astonished to learn that the finance directors hadn't bought a return ticket at all, not even one between the three of them. 'How on earth are you lot going to get back without any ticket at all?' asked a perplexed vice principal. 'Watch and you'll see' answered one of the finance directors. Once more, they all boarded the train together and took seats next to each other. After a while, one of the finance directors warned the rest that he thought that he had spotted the conductor checking tickets in the next carriage up. So this time all six left their seats and while the three vice principals crammed themselves into the toilet nearby, the three finance directors crammed themselves into the next toilet down. After a brief wait, the door of the finance directors' toilet opened and one of the finance directors came out. He walked up to the door of the toilet where the three vice principals were hiding, knocked and said, 'Tickets, please!' The door opened a crack, an arm came out and the ticket was presented. So the finance director took the ticket and quickly went back to join the finance directors in the other toilet.

Alan Birks – October 2013

If this newsletter has been forwarded to you by a colleague and in the future you would like to receive your own copy, you can register for this at www.click-cms.co.uk

All we require is your email address. You will then be sent your own copy of future editions and you can also access back issues.