

Sector Developments

Ofsted to bring management of all school and further education inspections in-house

In a speech to the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) in March this year, the Chief Inspector for England, Sir Michael Wilshaw, told delegates that inspection was 'just too important for Ofsted to simply have oversight of third-party arrangements'. Ofsted has now issued a press release announcing that from September 2015, it will 'no longer contract with Inspection Service Providers (ISPs) for the delivery of School and Further Education inspections'. The press release goes on to say that 'The current contracts, with the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT), Serco and Tribal, have run since September 2009 and are due to expire in August 2015, requiring Ofsted to review its inspection delivery model. Additional Inspectors (AIs), who are currently contracted through ISPs to undertake inspections on behalf of Ofsted, will continue to form a significant part of the inspection work force. However, from September 2015, AIs will be contracted directly by Ofsted, giving Ofsted more direct control over their selection, training and quality assurance'.

Ofsted launches new 'Employer View' website

Information on college performance is now available from a number of government agency websites. These include, amongst others, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) 'FE Choices' website, Ofsted's 'Learner View' website, Ofsted's main inspection report website, the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) website, and the National Careers Service (NCS) website. Some of these sites, such as 'FE Choices' and 'Learner View' also provide an opportunity for users to submit their own 'Trip Advisor' type ratings and opinions about the quality of service that colleges provide.

Last month (April) Ofsted launched another provider performance website called 'Employer View'. As the name suggests, this particular website is primarily intended for use by employers, who are also encouraged to use the site to anonymously rate and review the performance of the colleges they use. The site will enable employers to comment on such things as the college's communication with the employer in respect of employee progress, the quality of training provided and whether the employer would recommend the college to other users. Although the comments made on the website will be freely accessible to anyone, the details of the employers that submit ratings and evaluations will be kept confidential. A spokesperson for Ofsted said that the purpose of the new website was to help employers and their employees 'to choose the provider that is right for them'. However, critics have argued that, as has been the case with other 'Trip Advisor' type websites, the 'Employer View' website may be open to abuse. For example, the amount of data captured may not be statistically significant, or the views submitted may not represent a balanced sample or may even have been submitted by competitors. Responding to these concerns, the Ofsted spokesperson said that 'safeguards would be put in place to protect the site from potential misuse'.

Meanwhile, Ofsted's 'Learner View' website, that asks students to rate their colleges, and to say whether they would recommend the college to a friend, seems to be experiencing difficulty in persuading students to use the site. In the period since its launch in September 2012, the website has attracted an average of just 48 student responses per provider. At one college inspected last month, only 86 of its 14,629 students, (or 1 in 170) submitted a rating, and at another, only 58 students out of 15,257 (or 1 in 263) responded.

Ofsted launches new FE 'Data Dashboard' website

Apparently undaunted by the low usage of other sites, and seemingly unconcerned by the cost, Ofsted has launched another new provider performance website targeted at FE colleges and called the 'Data Dashboard'. A spokesperson for Ofsted said that, amongst other usages, it was hoped that college governors would use the new FE dashboard to hold college managers to account for their performance. The design of the new website is similar to Ofsted's existing data dashboard for schools, but the dashboard for colleges will contain a more extensive breakdown of information, including for example:

- Performance data for students aged 16-18 and for those aged 19 and over.
- Performance data for qualification aims at levels 1, 2 and 3 and the percentage of these qualifications that were achieved in the previous academic year.
- Separate performance data for mathematics and English GCSE and functional skills delivered within vocational education and training programme and apprenticeships.

- Learner destination data. (Data for learners over 19 is not expected to be available until November, when it will show how many unemployed learners have gone on to find jobs and how many have moved into further learning. It appears that Ofsted has dropped plans for the dashboard to show how far learners move away geographically after completing their course)
- Information on how a college's performance compares to that of other providers locally and nationally.
- Information that allows a college to be viewed in its local economic context (e.g. the extent to which the college is meeting Local Enterprise Partnership priorities).

Some observers have suggested that there may now be a 'crowded market place' for information on provider performance, and that the number and range of websites available may be confusing for prospective users. If this is the case, perhaps what might be needed is a new 'Website Choices' website, to help users decide which one of the provider performance websites is the right one for them. Users could be encouraged to rate and review the different websites available, and to say how useful they were and whether they would recommend a particular provider performance website to other users.

SFA announces changes to the method for calculating success rates

The SFA has announced changes to the way in which success rates will be calculated. Success rates, which measure how many students starting a course go on to achieve their qualification aim, were previously divided into long, short, and very short courses. However, for this academic year, all courses will be grouped by qualification type, according to whether they are classroom-based learning, workplace learning or apprenticeships. The SFA says that the changes will make it easier for individuals and employers to understand and make comparisons relating to the performance of different providers. New accountability measures for 16-19 year-olds will also be introduced, rating providers against headline measures that include retention, achievement, destinations and progress in English and mathematics (for those without a GCSE A* to C). Announcing the new measures on its website, the SFA said they would give 'a clear overview of the performance of a school or college compared with other institutions nationally'.

SFA eventually launches the new Learning Aims Reference System (LARS)

The long-awaited SFA Learning Aims Reference System (LARS) intended to help Management Information System (MIS) officers check whether qualifications are eligible for funding, and to calculate how much funding per student is generated, finally went live this month (May). The new system had originally been intended to be available for use by colleges at the start of 2013/14, along with a new Funding Information System (FIS) and a new Online Data Collection (OLDC) system. However the software initially provided to colleges proved to be unreliable and generally incapable of generating accurate and meaningful data.

Providers fail to meet Information Authority targets for 'employment status on enrolment' data

Recently released mid-year Individualised Learner Record (ILR) data indicates that around half of all providers have missed an Information Authority (IA) target of 0.6% for the number of learners 'for which they do not hold employment status information upon enrolment'. The FE sector as a whole reported 8.2% as having 'unknown' employment status against the 0.6% target. A spokesperson for the IA said that this means 'the employment status of tens of thousands of learners is not clear'.

FE Commissioner's reports to be published

Dr. David Collins, the recently appointed FE Commissioner who is sent into colleges when the quality of the college's provision is judged to be inadequate and/or because the college is deemed to be in serious financial difficulty (and/or for any other reason that ministers or funding agencies consider to be a cause for concern) has visited at least 10 colleges since his appointment last November. However, the reports of the findings arising from his visits have not, as yet, been made public. A spokesperson for the BIS has said that, to address this, the decision has now been taken to publish the Commissioner's reports 'to enable the sector to see and learn lessons from those that have been through the process'. The spokesperson went on to say that the timing of the publication of the reports would be determined 'on a case by case basis', but that the first report was likely to be published at the end of the month (May). Dr. Collins will also be producing an annual report that contains a 'high level summary' of his findings. The report will be sent out to all colleges, with the first annual report due out in the autumn.

College principals 'may not understand their role as chief executive'

A joint report recently published by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), the 157 Group and the Gazelle Group, entitled 'A New Conversation: Employer and College Engagement' refers to the fact that many college principals now use the term 'chief executive' in their title. The report says that, when questioned, this is because they see themselves as having two distinct roles, one being that of 'academic leader' (principal) and the other being that of 'business leader' (chief executive). However, the report queries whether principals really understand what is involved in being a 'chief executive', and argues that this understanding is necessary to enable principals 'to communicate more effectively with business leaders'. (In response to this, some observers have queried the extent to which some principals may actually be focusing too much on their 'business leadership' role, often to the detriment of their 'academic leadership' role).

The report offers a number of 'discussion topics' for the FE sector to consider. These topics include 'the importance of the college in contributing to its economic community', 'the college's credibility with employers in relation to its offer', and 'the need for employers to familiar with that offer and with the college itself'. With reference to the latter, the report says that 'business governors can help colleges understand local business needs in much more depth' because 'they bring clarity about direction, targets, priorities and expectations, challenging managers on what employer engagement really means in practice'. The report goes on to make recommendations for future leadership development programmes, and says that 'all major development programmes for further education leaders should include the knowledge and skills required to understand the market within which the college operates and to position the college effectively'.

New FE 'Think Tank' to be established

A new 'think tank', to be called the 'Further Education Trust for Leadership' (FETL) is to be set up with £5.5 million of funding left over from the former Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). Dame Ruth Silver, who was the chair of LSIS, is to become FETL's first president. Dame Ruth said that 'although many LSIS functions were transferred to the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), LSIS board members had identified the need for an FE think tank'. Responding to concerns expressed about the potential for duplicating the functions of the fledgling ETF, Dame Ruth explained that, FETL would work closely with the ETF in order to 'converge' and 'align' the work carried out by the two organisations (and presumably also that of the Institute for Learning).

A recent policy document suggests that FETL might become involved in such things as:

- The sponsorship of an annual lecture from a high profile 'thinker on FE leadership'
- Funding an academic chair at a university 'to bring stature to the sector'.
- 'Promoting a body of knowledge about leadership theory and practice in the FE sector'.
- Awarding fellowships.
- Allocating grants and bursaries for FE research.
- Funding a website where FE research papers would be published

Education and Training Foundation (ETF) publishes new 'Professional Standards'

The ETF has published a list of 20 new 'Professional Standards' for FE teachers, trainers and assessors to replace those issued by Lifelong Learning UK in 2007. The list comes with a 22-page guidance document that aims to 'offer practical examples of how the new standards can be applied'. The standards are published under three separate headings. These are:

- 'Values and Attributes'
- 'Knowledge and Understanding'
- 'Skills'

Examples of the professional practices included in the guidance document include the ability to:

- 'Evaluate and challenge your practice, values and beliefs'.
- 'Manage and promote positive learner behaviour'.
- 'Contribute to organisational development and quality improvement through collaboration with others'

The new standards appear to have been generally welcomed by sector representatives (although the AoC

has apparently 'declined to comment'). A spokesperson for the ETF said that the publication of the new standards was 'a major milestone for our sector', while a spokesperson for Ofsted said that the standards would be used as part of FE Initial Teacher Education (ITE) inspections, with inspectors using the standards to inform judgments on 'the success of leaders and managers in preparing trainees'. Further details on the new ETF Professional Standards are available on the ETF website.

Entrepreneurial activity in colleges 'must be underpinned by good governance'.

Speaking at the Gazelle Group of Colleges 'Annual Summit' held earlier this month (May), Dr. Susan Pember, the former head of Skills Investment at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), and now education and management adviser to the AoC, told delegates that initiatives designed to make FE institutions more entrepreneurial needed to be 'built on really sound accountability systems' and that they 'must be underpinned by good governance'. She went on to say that there was a need to 'balance risk and compliance' and, although staff should be encouraged to innovate, 'they should be very clear about their governance structures'. Dr. Pember said that on her visits to colleges she had seen 'good and outstanding examples of entrepreneurial activity', however she also said that she had seen some very questionable entrepreneurial projects that could potentially 'place the viability of the college at risk'.

Colleges are, of course, 'between a rock and a hard place'. On the one hand, they are being told by ministers that they must become 'more commercial' and reduce their reliance on public funding, and on the other, they are warned that they face dire consequences if the risks they are required to take go wrong.

Leadership of Teaching, Learning and Assessment by Governors

The 157 Group and Ofsted have published a joint report called 'Leadership of Teaching, Learning and Assessment by Governors' (a function that you might perhaps be forgiven for having thought was primarily the responsibility of college managers). The report draws on evidence obtained from 'a workshop held with governors' and 'other pieces of research', and says that governors should:

- 'Be clear about what constitutes outstanding teaching, learning and assessment, and look at each component of the definition separately'.
- 'Be confident about immersing themselves in this definition and form judgments based on the widest sources of evidence'.
- 'Take part in their college's quality monitoring cycle, focusing on the self-assessment report and establishing small ad hoc groups of governors to review evidence and progress as necessary'.

Commenting on the report, a spokesperson for Ofsted said 'we believe that this publication will be of assistance to all those who may be seeking inspiration for how to do a better job of governing'.

New organisation set up encourage 'high-calibre and skilled people' to become governors

The publication of the above report coincides with the launch of new body that has been given a brief 'to encourage high-calibre and skilled people to join school and college governing bodies' called the 'Inspiring Governors Alliance' (IGA). The IGA has also been given the brief to 'increase the number of employers prepared to encourage their employees to volunteer as governors, and to promote governance as a key learning and development opportunity for their staff'. The IGA has received support from a number of employer organisations, including the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB). The AoC is represented on the IGA board along with the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL). The launch of the IGA coincides with the publication of a joint report by the University of Bath and the National Governors' Association (NGA), based on a survey of more 7,500 governors across England, which claims that the monetary value of governors' voluntary contribution to the education system is in excess of £1 billion.

Large firms say they should be given direct control of apprenticeship funding

Having for some reason missed the deadline to formally respond to the government's latest technical consultation on proposed reforms to apprenticeship funding, a group of more than 30 large employer bodies has now decided to call on the government to give employers more control over apprenticeship funding. The main funding method suggested in the consultation document was one based on the PAYE system, whereby employers could claim back the cost of apprenticeships through the tax system. However, on the basis of more than 1,200 responses received *before* the deadline had passed, the PAYE option was

deemed to be the least popular, with the majority of respondents saying that they preferred the continuation of the current system of channeling apprenticeship funding through providers. Nevertheless, in a letter to the Daily Telegraph sent earlier this month, the employer group, which includes the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), Nestle and Crossrail, said that 'Placing employers in control of the design, delivery and funding of apprenticeships is essential' and that 'control over funding would allow us to design apprenticeships which are more relevant to the needs of the British economy'. Katja Hall, the CBI chief policy director, and one of the signatories to the letter, said 'Businesses strongly support the move to a demand-led apprenticeships system, and employer-directed funding is an integral part of this'. Another of the signatories, Sir Charlie Mayfield, chair of the John Lewis Partnership and UKCES, said 'UKCES believes that the most effective way to put employers in the driving seat is to use HMRC systems, arguing that 'Using the tax system would provide 'a long-term stable system that employers can rely upon'. Skills Minister Matthew Hancock (who is thought to be in favour of the PAYE option), warmly welcomed the letter, saying that it illustrated 'the strong support shown for our reforms by leading large and small businesses and by the organisations that represent them'.

New employer-led apprenticeship funding model for the first 'Trailblazer' group

'Trailblazers' are defined as 'groups of employers working together to design new apprenticeship standards for occupations in their sectors'. The first 'Trailblazer' group is made up of employers in the aerospace, automotive, digital industries, electro-technical, energy and utilities, financial services, food and drink manufacturing and life sciences and industrial sciences sectors. BIS has now announced a new Trailblazer funding model that will apply to apprentices starting their courses on or before 31 July 2015 that includes a mandatory cash contribution by the employer towards the cost of apprenticeship programme. The funding model will apparently involve the establishment of five funding bands reflecting the occupational sector concerned, and into which apprenticeship programmes would be placed. Each band will have a funding limit, with an overall maximum contribution of £2 from the government for every £1 from contributed by the employer, but an SFA spokesperson said that extra funding would be provided for successful completions, for businesses with less than 50 employees and for apprentices aged 16-18. However, the spokesperson went on to say that BIS wanted employers 'to investigate the provider market and negotiate their own terms so that they might lower their own costs, and those of the tax-payer, in providing the apprenticeship'.

The government has yet to publish the results of its recent technical consultation on apprenticeship funding reform. It is therefore unclear at present as to how the Trailblazer pilots might be affected by the proposed PAYE credit system, (thought to be the government's preference for apprenticeship funding).

New joint guidance on Traineeships

New joint guidance on Traineeships recently issued by BIS and the Department for Education (DfE) will come into force this August. The changes include the following:

- The 6-week rule has been replaced with guidance that says that 'work placements will last between 100-240 hours', which, at 35 hours per week, equates to between 2 and 7 weeks and that, although 'Longer placements may be necessary to prepare young people for work', these would need to be based on 'clearly identified learner needs'.
- The 6-month maximum duration for Traineeships will remain in place.
- For benefit claimants, the work experience element of a Traineeship can be up to 240 hours (or extended if the offer of an Apprenticeship place is accepted) at a maximum of 30 hours a week
- The requirement to identify a work placement host at the start of the programme has been removed. Providers will now be able 'to identify the employer providing the work experience placement up to 4 weeks after the traineeship has started'.
- 24 year olds will be allowed to take up traineeships. (This was announced in February's Skills Funding Statement.
- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) 16-hour rule, which limited the amount of time trainees aged 19 and over could train every week and still receive benefits, has been removed. (This was announced in March).
- The rule that Traineeships can only be offered by providers that have achieved an Ofsted 'good' or 'outstanding' inspection result has been retained.

Fall in numbers of NEETs

Data published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) shows that during the period from January to March 2014, 975,000 (or 13.5%) of England's 16-24 year olds were considered NEET. This compares to 1.036 million (or 14.4%) the previous three months. The ONS data also revealed that between January and March, 53,000 16 and 17 year olds were NEET, compared to 66,000 from October to December 2013. Of the 975,000 16-24 year olds recorded as NEET between January and March, only 507,000 (52%) were considered to be technically 'unemployed' because they were 'looking for or available for work'. The other 468,000 were deemed to be 'economically inactive'.

Somewhat curiously, BIS and the DfE said that they 'did not recognise' the ONS statistics, and have published their own NEET data. In documents released with the data, the BIS and the DfE explain that although 'long-term trends were similar to those seen in ONS data', 'different coverage and ages used can lead to some discrepancies when comparing change between specific points in time'. They therefore argue that there were actually only 774,000 16-24 year old NEETs in the period from January to March 2014 (compared to the ONS figure of 975,000). This, in turn, has enabled Skills Minister Matthew Hancock to claim that the number of NEETs are now 'at their lowest level since 2005'.

EFA issues new guidance in an attempt to prevent 'double funding'.

New EFA guidance says that if a provider wants the EFA to fund sub-contracted provision that will be delivered 'outside their normal recruitment area', then it 'must seek EFA's agreement in principle in advance of delivery, and at least 8 weeks before the start of any planned delivery'. In explaining the change, the guidance says that 'sub-contracted provision (particularly distance provision) has had the highest number of historic ineligible double funding problems' (i.e. the potential for a learner to be funded twice through two different lead contractors) and that the EFA regards such arrangements as 'high risk'.

EFA says that bursary underspends of more than £500 must be returned

The EFA has issued new guidance that will prevent FE and sixth form colleges from carrying forward unspent 16-19 bursary funds of more than £500 into the next financial year. The new guidance says that underspends totaling more than £500 must be reported and handed back to the EFA. The EFA is yet to clarify whether the new rule will come into effect this academic year or in September. Since most colleges spend more on bursaries for their disadvantaged students than they are allocated, they apparently see the new EFA rule as perhaps being more pointless than it is restrictive.

More funding needed if the number of state students gaining entry top universities is to increase.

A recent report from the AoC says that the average annual fees per student of £14,475 (not including boarding fees) received by private school sixth forms in England is more than three times the funding for 16-18 year olds in state schools and colleges. The report goes on to say that, in 2011, 24% state school pupils went on to the most selective universities, compared with 64% of private school pupils (although private schools educate just 7% of all sixth formers). The report also says that in the private sector, fees for sixth formers are higher than for younger pupils, and that private sixth form fees have risen by 22% in the past four years. In contrast, spending on sixth form education in the state sector has been 'frozen in cash terms' and is around £1,000 less than that spent on 11-15 year olds. The report says that because of this, increasing numbers of colleges and schools in the state sector are 'having to take steps to close courses, freeze pay and cut staffing numbers'. Responding to the report, a Department for Education (DfE) spokesperson somewhat obtusely explained 'We have worked to protect funding for 16 and 17 year olds and we have introduced a new performance system so colleges and sixth forms will, for the first time, have to show they are getting their students into universities, jobs and apprenticeships'.

Free Schools spending is 'out of control'

The Liberal Democrats' deputy leader, Malcolm Bruce, has said that the budget for Free Schools is 'completely out of control' and has accused Education Secretary Michael Gove of being 'ideologically obsessed' with them. Mr. Bruce claims that '30,000 much needed local authority places' have been lost as a result money being diverted to new Free Schools and called for Mr. Gove 'to be reined back', saying that there was an urgent need for the Free Schools programme to be 'properly costed and controlled'. Mr. Bruce also accused Mr. Gove of taking £400m from the Basic Need Budget (provided to ensure that 'no child is denied the basic right to an education) in order to help cover a projected £800 million overspend in the Free

Schools budget. Whilst not denying this, Mr. Gove has argued that the Basic Need Budget will still rise by more than £200 million a year over the period 2015-17 and that 'the expansion of free schools will lead to more school places overall'. However, a recent report from the National Audit Office (NAO) found that only 19% of secondary Free Schools had been opened in areas of 'high or severe need' and that 42 new Free Schools, costing £241 million, had been opened in areas with 'no forecasted need'. The NAO report also said that although Free Schools are 'routinely described as being hugely popular with parents', just 49 (or 28%) of the Free Schools opened since 2011 'have reached their capacity for a first year intake'. (The £8 million Boulevard Academy in Hull opened with just 48 pupils). Tristram Hunt, the Shadow Education Secretary, joined in the argument by claiming that the government was funding far more Free School places than had been taken up, and that given the 'national crisis' in respect of the shortage of primary school places, in prioritising expenditure on Free Schools, Mr. Gove was 'behaving irresponsibly'.

PAC criticises Free School financial management and capital costs

And just to add to the fun, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has weighed in with a report that says that the management of some free schools is 'inadequate' and that malpractice in Free Schools is 'overly reliant on whistleblowers'. The PAC report says that the 'high-profile failures' of three Free Schools show that 'not enough is being done to ensure that public money is being used properly' and suggests that 'financial management standards at some Free Schools is not up to scratch'. The report goes on to say that 'the government's light-touch governance model requires high levels of compliance by schools, yet fewer than half of free schools had submitted their required financial returns for 2011/12 on time', and that, in some cases, 'problems identified by whistleblowers should have been found earlier through official audit and review processes'. The PAC report also expresses concerns at the 'escalating capital costs' of the Free School programme, particularly in the light of the government's commitment to spend a further £1.5bn on Free Schools in the period to March 2015. As a result, the PAC report recommends that there should be 'tighter cost management, particularly with regard to buying land for school sites'.

First Academy Chain closes

Meanwhile, the DfE has confirmed that Prospects Academies Trust, which runs six Academies, will be the first academy chain to close. A spokesperson said that the DfE was now 'looking for new sponsors to take them over' and claimed that pupils at the schools 'would not be disrupted'. Dr Mary Bousted, general secretary of the ATL, which represents some of the staff at the schools, has urged the DfE to avoid engaging in what she called a 'fire sale'.

Ofsted 'should inspect private schools in England'

Private schools are currently inspected by various bodies, of which the most prominent is the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI). Speaking at a conference for private schools, Education Secretary, Michael Gove suggested that there should be a 'single inspectorate for both the private and state education sectors' and that it 'would send a very powerful signal if the Ofsted Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw and his team of inspectors were to inspect all schools'. The head of fee-paying Brighton College, Richard Cairns, said that it was likely that there would be a 'lukewarm response' to Mr. Gove's proposal from most private schools and that 'weaker private schools would worry about a direct point of comparison with the state sector'. Mr. Cairns went on to say that 'many in the independent sector would object to being inspected by Ofsted' on the grounds that 'they were being inspected by people coming from very different educational worlds'. Mr. Gove responded to this by suggesting that perhaps more teachers from the independent sector might 'spend some time serving as Ofsted inspectors' in the state sector.

A third of university students in England say their degree course is 'poor value for money'

The Russell Group of universities has recently announced that the group's 24 members have embarked on new building programmes collectively worth £9.4 billion. However, the announcement coincides with the publication of the findings of a survey of 15,046 UK students conducted on behalf of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) that shows that:

- 33% of students at universities in England feel they are receiving poor or very poor value for money the fees of up to £9,000 per year are required to pay
- 35% of undergraduates say that the amount of teaching they receive is insufficient. Undergraduate students now receive an average of 14.2 hours of 'contact' time (e.g. time spent in lectures and

seminars), and spend another 14.3 hours on average in private study. This is much less than the 40 hours a week of study suggested in the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) guidelines.

- 35% say that the size of teaching groups is too large.
- Students did not attend around 10% of their lectures and seminars, with the most common reasons for not doing so being that they did not find them very useful and that the notes were available online.
- 31% say they would have chosen another course 'if they were to have their time again'

Commenting on the findings, Universities Minister David Willetts said students now 'have higher expectations' and that 'the days when the academic experience is simply sitting in rows with 500 other people taking notes from slides on a screen that you can access online on your laptop have gone'. A similar survey carried out in Scotland found that 70% of Scottish students at Scottish universities rated their course as good or very good value for money. This is perhaps both surprising and unsurprising, since Scottish students do not actually pay any university tuition fees.

In reaction to all this, some observers have suggested that HE provision should be inspected by a new Ofsted HE directorate, with University lecturers being observed by Ofsted inspectors and graded on the quality of their teaching in classes and tutorials. Inspectors would make judgments about a university's overall effectiveness, the quality of its leadership and management, the quality of teaching learning and assessment, and outcomes for students, including student destinations. Inspectors could measure distance travelled and value added, and make comments on the robustness of the university's self-assessment report and lesson observation system. They might also make a judgment on the contribution the university makes to LEP priorities, the way in which it makes itself accountable to the local community and other key stakeholders, and the value it provides for public money. And pigs might be seen flying past the vice chancellor's office window.

HE students in England 'should apply for loans now'.

In 2012/13, around 70,000 English HE students (almost one third) missed the deadline to apply for their loan from the Student Loans Company (SLC). As a result, many went weeks into their course without receiving any cash. Many of those that delayed applying for loans waited until they had received their GCE A level results and had had their places confirmed by universities. However, because each application can take up to 6 weeks to process, and some costs, such as halls of residence, travel costs and books, have to be met upfront, many students were left without the means to meet these costs. In an attempt to avoid a repeat of this in 2014/15, a spokesperson for the SLC said that students should 'apply online now using their first-choice offer' and should 'send requested information, including financial details from their parents, as soon as possible'. The deadline for loan applications from new students in England for the coming academic year is the end of this month (May). Continuing students have until the end of June. Meanwhile, the SLC has recently been the subject of criticism from the Information Commissioner's Office (not, of course, to be confused with the Information Authority, the Data Service or the ONS) for failing to adequately protect student personal data, including medical records, some of which has apparently been inadvertently leaked to third parties.

Applications for entry to higher education apprenticeships could be made through UCAS

The University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) already acts as a 'portal' for candidates applying to study Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs), including those studied at FE colleges, and now, responding to a request from BIS Secretary, Vince Cable, it seems likely that UCAS will become involved in providing a clearing system for higher apprenticeships and promoting them as a possible alternative to degree studies. A spokesperson for UCAS said 'applications for higher apprenticeships tend to be made locally, which means it's not the same as higher education where students apply from across the country, so we need to look at that', but went on to say that 'we look forward to discussing higher apprenticeships with BIS and working together to ensure that students have access to the best possible information as they make decisions about their future education and career pathways'.

Decline in part-time higher education study

Research conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has shown that the number of part-time undergraduate entrants in England fell from around 259,000 in 2010/11 to around 139,000 in 2013/14. This is a contraction of 120,000 (or 46%). Responding to the fall in part time numbers, a spokesperson for the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) said that 'the report

highlights just how far we are from having a diverse, flexible and creative higher education system’.

Ministerial advice given to schools and colleges on combating radicalisation and FGM

Education Secretary Michael Gove has sent a letter to the heads of all schools and colleges asking for increased levels of awareness of the dangers of abuse, and that includes new guidance on dealing with religious radicalisation and female genital mutilation (FGM). The new guidance contains an 8-page summary that, Mr. Gove says, should, ‘as a minimum’, be read by all school and college and contains advice to staff members about which agencies to contact for help. The section on radicalisation explains how local ‘panels’ including the police, local authorities, schools and colleges can work together to support vulnerable children and adults and says that signs to look for ‘may include a change of style of dress or personal appearance and loss of interest in other friends and activities’. There is also a new section giving guidance on dealing with female genital mutilation (FGM). The guidance says that ‘all professionals need to be alert to the possibility of a girl being at risk of FGM, or already having suffered FGM’ and to be aware that ‘girls at risk of the practice may not know they are in danger’.

ESOL certificates allegedly ‘sold for £500’

The Home Office is investigating claims that migrants who cannot speak English have been able to buy English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) certificates. The ESOL qualification tests a candidate’s speaking and listening skills and is now compulsory for non-English speakers applying for British citizenship. Home Office staff searched the ‘Learn, Pass, Succeed’ school in Upton Park in East London, where it has been alleged that applicants have been able to obtain a ‘guaranteed pass’ for the Entry 3 Level English ESOL examination in return a payment of £500. It is also alleged that candidates did not have to attend the centre, take any classes or sit the test themselves, and that staff at the centre either used a fake candidate to take the test or completed it themselves. Immigration Minister James Brokenshire said that the government would ‘take the strongest possible action against anyone who is found to have abused the rules’, but added the ESOL certificate was ‘just one element of a wide range of evidence required by individuals applying for settlement and citizenship’ and that no one ‘could gain a UK visa on the strength of this qualification alone’. A spokesperson for Ofqual said it was ‘aware of the allegations and was urgently seeking further information’.

DfE gives assurances to colleges on new Special Education Needs (SEN) legal obligations

Concerns have been expressed that funding and capacity constraints will restrict the ability of FE and sixth form colleges to meet their legal obligations in respect of the SEN element of the new Children and Families Act 2014. Under the new legislation, FE and sixth form colleges are legally required to admit SEN learners if the college is named in their Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan. A spokesperson for the AoC said that there were two challenges faced by colleges in meeting their SEN obligations. The first was ‘the duty to co-operate with Local Authorities’ (LAs), which, the spokesperson said would be difficult ‘because many LAs still focus on school issues at the expense of post-16 provision’. The second was that the local authority’s high needs budget may not be enough to provide the level of support needed, and the college’s own learner support funds were likely have been cut back. Responding to these concerns, a DfE spokesperson confirmed that ‘colleges have a legal duty to accept young people with special educational needs’, but went on to say that the DfE had ‘already provided councils with £70 million to help them prepare for these changes’. The spokesperson also said the DfE ‘had provided guidance to all colleges on what these changes mean and will be providing them with extra money to cover any new costs that may arise’.

Learndirect may be listed on the Stock Exchange

It seems that Learndirect may be preparing to ‘float’ itself on the Stock Exchange and has apparently appointed Numis Securities to advise on the listing. Learndirect launched in 2000 as part of the ‘University for Industry’ (Ufi) initiative. It was subsequently sold to Lloyds Development Capital along with Ufi Ltd in 2011 for £40 million. The following year, Learndirect merged with JHP Ltd (the Pitman Group). Learndirect is one of the largest providers in the training and e-assessment markets with a network of over 490 centres and more than 2,000 employees nationwide and with a current SFA allocation of £154.6 million. The firm also delivers around 18,000 apprenticeships a year on behalf of high profile companies such as McDonalds. Learndirect was inspected by Ofsted in March 2013 and was judged as ‘good’.

And finally...

This is a gruesome health and safety story. Readers of a sensitive disposition may find some aspects disturbing. There may also be some flash photography (or more probably, not).

A woodwork technician was working late one night in an FE college carpentry workshop. He was on his own in the wood machinery workshop and was using a circular bench saw to prepare woodcuts for students to use in classes the following day. For some inexplicable reason the saw's safety cover had been removed, exposing the rotating blade. Concentrating on getting a perfectly straight cut, the technician leaned too far across the workbench and, failing to notice the approaching blade, he tragically cut his own head off. The head rolled off the end of the workbench and came to rest in a corner on the workshop floor. Being a cool character, the technician kept his head (even though it had just been cut off) and did not panic. Remembering the enormous strides that had been made in microsurgery, he knew that he had to get to the local hospital as quickly as possible and find a micro-surgeon to sew his head back on.

The first problem faced by the technician was to find his missing head. This was no easy task because although his head was shouting 'I'm over here, in the corner', the technician couldn't hear it. Nevertheless, by systematically feeling his way around the workshop, the technician eventually found his head, picked it up and put it in a plastic carrier bag that he had thoughtfully filled with ice from the staffroom fridge. He then went outside to catch the bus that would take him to the local hospital accident and emergency department. Sadly he never made it there. Despite numerous government health and safety campaigns warning people never to put their heads in plastic bags, the technician had nevertheless done so, and just as he got to the hospital main entrance, he suffocated to death.

Alan Birks – May 2014

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