

## **Sector Developments**

### **Providers under-achieved their 2013/14 SFA Adult Skills contract and exceeded it at the same time**

It seems that in 2013/14, 67% of all FE and skills providers returned a total shortfall of £111.8 million against their collective SFA adult skills contract target of £2,210.7 million. A further 9% of providers met their SFA target and 24% of providers exceeded their collective SFA target by a total of £20.6 million. This means that the FE and skills sector as a whole under-delivered against its collective SFA adult skills target contract by a total £91.2 million. However, no doubt just to show that nothing is impossible when it comes to FE, it would appear that that even though the sector collectively under achieved its 2013/14 SFA adult skills target, it also over achieved the target. By way of explanation, a spokesperson for the AoC said 'If we compare actual delivery of the adult skills budget in 2013/14, then it is true that a number of providers did not deliver their full contract value. However, during the year, many providers received increases in budget allocations, so even though they may have collectively delivered £65.7 million of provision above their original contracts, they did not reach their new increased contract limits'.

### **Many colleges face the risk of unexpected claw back**

In an email sent to providers just before Christmas, the SFA appeared to threaten providers with considerable levels of claw back on their 2013/14 funding allocation. This invoked an outraged response from many providers, particularly since the Agency's own auditors had already signed off their 2013/14 accounts. The SFA said that claw back would be necessary because since the accounts had been signed off, the agency discovered that significant amount of funding had incorrectly been claimed. Examples given by the SFA of incorrect claims included apprenticeships that did not meet the minimum duration criteria, and students aged 24 who were not eligible for full funding. A spokesperson for the AoC asked why, if 'the SFA has now found errors, these weren't picked up earlier by the auditors', and went on to ask if this might have something to do with the frequent breakdowns of the new software and systems introduced by the SFA last year.

In the wake of the complaints received, the SFA now appears to have softened its position, and in an email the SFA Director of Funding sent to providers earlier this month (January) he apologises for the earlier SFA email, saying that it was 'premature', and that he 'regretted its tone'. The email goes on to explain that the main issue the SFA wanted to highlight 'was the importance of accurate data'. However, what the email did *not* say is that providers would face no further claw back in respect of their 2013/14 provision.

### **Younger apprentices are the most affected by failure to pay the National Minimum Wage (NMW)**

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has recently published its 2014 'Apprenticeship Pay Survey'. The survey reveals that in 2014 almost a quarter of 16-18 year old apprentices were paid less than the NMW (which was £2.68 per hour at the time of the survey). This makes younger apprentices the group most affected by NMW non-compliance. The report says that failure to pay the NMW affected 14% of all apprentices at all ages, with evidence of non-compliance arising in respect of:

- 24% of 16-18 year old apprentices
- 20% of 19-20 year old apprentices
- 17% of 21-24 year old apprentices
- 8% of apprentices aged 25 or older

The report also showed that, although 94% of apprentices had heard of the NMW, and 60% were aware there was a specific NMW for apprentices depending on age, only 26% said they knew what the rate for their own age actually was. With reference to occupational sectors, NMW non-compliance was most common for apprentices in hairdressing (42%), childcare (26%) and construction (also 26%). In addition, 18% of apprentices who worked overtime were not paid for any of their overtime hours. In a separate BIS publication entitled 'Apprenticeships Evaluation: Learners' Report', it was also revealed that around 30,000 apprentices (around 4%) had not received any formal or informal on or off the job training during their contracted working hours.

### **Fewer young people are taking up apprenticeships (but more older people are)**

Other data recently published by BIS shows that the overall number of apprenticeship starts fell in 2013/14 for the second successive year. Within these overall figures the number of apprentices aged 24 and under has contracted by almost 12,000 in the last 2 years. Commenting on this, a BIS spokesman said,

'government reforms have focused on improving the standard of the training on offer and this may have led to a drop in the number of new starts'.

However, with reference to older people, since 2009/10

- The number of apprentices aged over 60 has risen by 715%
- The number of apprentices aged 45-59 has risen by 522%
- The number of apprentices aged 35-44 has risen by 374%.

The number of apprentices aged 25-44 now accounts for 34% of all apprentices (up from 14% in 2009/10). It seems that many apprentices aged 25 and over were already working for their employer *before* starting their apprenticeship and this has led to claims that existing jobs are being 're-badged' as apprenticeships.

### **Skills Minister quizzed on delays in implementing reforms to apprenticeship funding**

Facing questions from MPs about delays in the implementation of the government's proposals for the reform of apprenticeship funding, Skills and Equalities Minister for England, Nick Boles told the House of Commons Education Select Committee that 'more research was needed on proposals to fund apprenticeships via employers'. Mr Boles said that he thought that the government had 'gone off half-cock' on apprenticeship reform and that the initial proposals (which, he was at pains to point out, had been initiated by his predecessor) 'had not been fully formed'. He went on to say that it had 'not been ideal to come forward with two proposals and then decide not to go ahead with either of them'. However, he denied that the reforms had 'been kicked into the long grass' and attributed the delay to the 'constraints of the impending general election'.

### **BIS publishes list of approved 14-19 vocational qualifications**

In the Wolf Review of 14-19 vocational qualifications, schools were accused of attempting to boost their positions in league tables, by entering 'thousands of students for vocational qualifications that were of little value'. This led to a review of 14-19 vocational qualifications and BIS has now published its final list of approved technical and vocational qualifications for 14-19 year old students in England. As a result the number of vocational qualifications eligible for public funding has fallen from in excess of 5,000 down to 625, which BIS says 'will help provide clearer career pathways for students'. The approved qualifications will be placed into three categories. These are:

- Technical Certificates (aimed at helping 16-19-year-olds into skilled trades)
- Technical Awards (for 14-16 year olds)
- Tech Levels (that are intended to be GCE A level equivalent vocational qualifications for 16-19 year olds)

The latest qualifications will impact on a provider's position in school league tables from January 2017.

### **FELTAG recommendations for minimum on-line content will not now be implemented**

Last year, the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (FELTAG) produced a report that recommended that 10% of the content of all further education courses in England should be delivered online by 2015/16. Former Skills Minister for England, Matthew Hancock accepted the FELTAG recommendation, and proposed that delivery of the required on-line component should become a condition of funding. However, speaking at the BETT technology trade show in London earlier this month (January), the current minister, Nick Boles, said he felt the FELTAG recommendations had been 'over interpreted' and that as a result, he was 'not planning to be prescriptive in implementing them'. Clarifying what he meant by this, Mr Boles said that he regarded the 10% minimum as being 'more of a vague target' and that he would 'prefer to focus on improving broadband infrastructure in colleges, and developing a forum for sharing best learning technology practice'. He said he had been 'shocked to discover that one sixth-form college thought that to meet the FELTAG recommendation, it was necessary to measure every lesson and work out what percentage of the time was spent using technology'. He went on to say 'this is exactly what should *not* be happening. That's simply wasting teachers' time and I don't want to be adding any more to their burden'.

### **Campaign to persuade the government to drop the 'learning tax' on sixth-form colleges**

Unlike schools and academies, sixth-form colleges in England are unable to reclaim their VAT payments. The government says they are liable to pay VAT because they are 'classified by the Office of National

Statistics (ONS) as private-sector organisations' (as are FE colleges). The Sixth Form Colleges' Association (SFCA) has called this 'a clear injustice' and argues that failure to refund VAT to sixth-form colleges amounts to a 'learning tax that leaves the average sixth-form college with £335,000 less to spend on students' education each year'. The SFCA has now approached prominent former sixth-form college alumni to enlist their support for the campaign and thus far, amongst those who have responded, are the actor Colin Firth and the broadcaster Dermot O'Leary. In response to the SFCA's demands, Nick Boles says that he plans to 'open discussions' with the Treasury about a possible VAT exemption for sixth form colleges, but went on to say 'One of the things I am looking into is the possibility of enabling sixth form colleges to change their status, particularly if they are willing to link up with other schools'. Some observers have interpreted this as meaning that sixth-form colleges would be taken out of the further education and skills sector and re-located in the schools sector. SFCA deputy chief executive James Kewin said he 'welcomed any steps taken by the government towards equality with school sixth forms', but called for further clarity over Mr Boles' remarks, saying 'It was an interesting response, but we are going to need more information'. Meanwhile, it seems that any prospect that further education colleges might also be able to recover their VAT payments is remote. This might be because, as senior BIS officials have implied in the past, nobody particularly cares what happens to the FE sector and if it disappeared, 'nobody would notice'.

### **Former Ofsted Strategy Director and senior DfE policy advisor says that FE colleges are 'rubbish'**

One person who seems to have formed a firm view of the worth of FE colleges is Richard Brooks, who was Ofsted's Director of Strategy from September 2009 to August 2013, and prior to this, was the DfE senior policy adviser to Ed Balls when he was Education Secretary for England. During a panel discussion on issues relating to young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), at the Fabian Society's New Year conference earlier this month (January), Mr Brooks said that FE colleges were 'rubbish'. He went on to say that FE colleges were 'huge public bureaucracies, sucking up public money and churning out young people who don't have the skills and qualifications they need'. Presumably anxious to make absolutely sure that he was getting his point across, he went on to say 'It's absolutely outrageous. We should all be very angry with this, but because colleges are below the radar, they get away with it, giving the excuse that 'these people are hard to help' and 'we're doing the best we can'. Mr Brooks, who chose to be educated at King's College Cambridge and the London School of Economics rather than at, say, at his local FE College, said that many young people were failing 'because they had received bad advice from colleges'. He went on to say, 'It's beyond a joke, and it happens to thousands of young people. They carry on with their education in college on a false promise this is going to lead them to where they want to get to, but they don't get the skills they need. So they stay in education at 16 and 17 only to become NEET at 18'. A spokesperson for the AoC leapt to the defence of the sector and suggested that Mr Brooks' comments were 'unsubstantiated'. It appears that allegations that Mr Brooks is now under 24 hour police armed guard after receiving death threats from fundamentalist members of the Principals' Professional Council for insulting FE, are also unsubstantiated.

### **CBI proposes the abolition of GCSEs**

In his 'New Year message', John Cridland, the director general of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) called for the 'abolition of GCSEs at 16' and for them to be replaced by 'tailored learning plans for all 14-18 year olds'. Mr Cridland said 'that the case for examinations at 16 is weakened by the raising of the participation age to 18, since it perpetuates the single-track, academic approach that weakens our vocational system'. He went on to say 'Instead, we want each young person to have a learning plan, tailored for them from age 14 to 18. Everyone would do some form of English and mathematics, plus a mix of academic or vocational A-levels depending on what's right for them' and added 'this would involve the abolition of GCSEs at age 16, and peak level testing taking place when students are aged 18'.

### **Taskforce on alternatives to GCSE mathematics and English**

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) has announced that Professor Ed Sallis (who was principal of Highlands College in Jersey from 1997 to 2012) will chair the taskforce established by Nick Boles to review the teaching and accreditation of mathematics and English for those students who achieved a GCSE Grade D or below in those subjects. New funding conditions means that students who have achieved a GCSE Grade D in English and mathematics at GCSE will, from next year, be required retake the subjects in the attempt to get a grade C or above. However, those students who have achieved a GCSE at Grade E or below will be allowed to take alternative qualifications in the attempt to gain a GCSE Grade C equivalent (e.g. in Functional Skills). The Association of Colleges (AoC), the Association of

Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) and Holes, (the adult learning providers network), who are the 3 owners of ETF, will each nominate a taskforce member. A further three members will be nominated by the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES).

### **PAC says that the DfE has 'little understanding' of the impact of its initiatives on 16-18 year olds**

The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has published the report of its inquiry into participation in education and training among 16-18 year olds. The PAC chair, Margaret Hodge, says that the report has revealed that the DfE has 'little understanding of the impact of its existing initiatives and programmes' on the age group. As a result, Ms Hodge said that the DfE should 'undertake an urgent review of the effectiveness of its initiatives'. The inquiry report also says the following:

- The amount the government spends on the education of 16-18 year olds has fallen by 8% in real terms since 2010/11 and in September 2014 it reduced the basic rate of annual funding for an 18 year old from £4,000 to £3,300'.
- Government spending on 16 to 17 year olds is now 22% lower than spending on 11-16 year olds.
- The DfE has no plans to replace the Youth Contract scheme (which supports the hardest to reach young people) when it comes to an end next year.
- The proportion of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) was at its lowest since records began, but 148,000 were still NEET at the end of 2013.
- The main reason for the fall the number of young people classified as NEET 'was the requirement for young people to remain in education or training until at least their 18th birthday'. In the light of this, it was 'difficult to show that any other interventions, such as careers advice, have been effective'.
- Careers advice was, in any event, 'patchy' and it was 'unclear what action the DfE would take when a school was shown to be offering poor careers advice'.
- The report highlighted that travel 'is a major issue for students' and that 'sometimes it can be the difference between a young person being able to go to college or not' and says that this is 'a particular problem for students from lower income backgrounds and for those living in rural areas'. Further cuts to these services 'could worryingly see a whole generation of people being unable to get to college'.
- The proposed reforms to apprenticeship funding designed to put employers in control of apprenticeships 'were in danger of putting off businesses, and particularly smaller businesses from taking on apprentices'.

Commenting on the criticism of careers advice contained in the report, a DfE spokesperson said 'We are doing more to enable young people to access high quality advice and opportunities that will enable them to make informed decisions, and in particular through the creation of a new Careers Company'. The spokesperson went on to say 'The new company will encourage greater collaboration between employers and schools, helping them access a wealth of experience to inspire young people across the country about the possibilities of the world of work'.

### **Concerns about duplication in roles of the NCS and the new Careers Company**

Education Secretary for England, Nicky Morgan was accused of 'evading MPs' questions' when she was called before the House of Commons Education Select Committee to outline how the proposed new 'Careers Company' would operate and improve careers advice. During the hearing, Ms Morgan confirmed the initial £20 million of funding announced in the Chancellor's Autumn Statement would fund the first two years of the company's activities, and that it was hoped employers would meet running costs after that. However, it seems that she was unable to provide satisfactory answers to questions from MPs about how it 'would operate and improve careers advice'. The committee chair, Graham Stuart MP pointed out that there were 'striking similarities between the remit of the Careers Company and that of the existing National Careers Service (NCS)'. He said that he understood that the NCS was intended to 'broker relationships between schools, colleges, local communities and employers' and went on to say that this appeared to be exactly the role that the new Careers Company would be carrying out. Ms Morgan responded by explaining that 'the NCS and the new Careers Company were different', but they 'would work together to deliver the same goal'.

### **NAO refuses to 'sign off' Department for Education (DfE) accounts**

The National Audit Office (NAO) has 'provided an adverse opinion on the DfE group financial statements' saying that they were not 'true and fair', and that 'the level of error identified is both material and pervasive'.



Because of this, the NAO says that the DfE 'has not met the requirements of Parliament'. The NAO says that problems have arisen because the DfE 'has had to combine the accounts of more than 2,500 organisations, including academy trusts collectively running 3,905 individual academies, its own statements and that of its executive agencies' and that the DfE 'has a different reporting period to academy trusts'. This had 'left the department facing a significant challenge in preparing and providing accounts that give a fair and true reflection of the financial activity across all bodies over the 12 months and the financial position at the end of the year'. Responding to the NAO report, a DfE spokesperson said 'we recognise the issues identified by the NAO and we take the concerns very seriously'. And no doubt not wanting to pass up an opportunity to score a few political points, shadow education secretary for England, Tristram Hunt said 'The accounts reflect serious management and leadership failings at the DfE that go all the way to the top and raise very serious questions about the ability of ministers to run the department'.

### **Cuts in ESOL funding may have backfired**

Despite a slight increase in funding this year (2014/15) and the establishment of a new qualification structure, earlier cuts to funding for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programmes has meant that many Colleges in England have cut back on (or even cut out altogether) their ESOL provision. However, it seems that if this was a government strategy to save money, it may have had the opposite effect. A response to a Freedom of Information (FoI) Act request has revealed that the government is now having to spend an all time high of in excess of £100 million a year on providing interpreters for those who can't speak English or have poor English, or need to have documents translated in order to help them access public services or to engage with, for example, the police, local authority departments, schools, hospitals and courts. The increase in demand for interpretation services has however, proved to be very lucrative for the private companies that provide translation services (e.g. Capita). Perhaps missing the point slightly, Communities Secretary for England, Eric Pickles said 'the guidance I've issued is crystal clear. Councils should stop wasting taxpayers' money by translating into foreign languages. Translation holds people back from integrating into British society'. However, many critics have pointed out that it clearly becomes more difficult for a newcomer to learn English and integrate if there are fewer ESOL courses available to help them do so.

### **New collaborative grant announced by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)**

HEFCE has announced that £11.02 million will be allocated to individual universities and colleges between now and 2016 in a bid to improve collaboration with schools and colleges. Of this total, £714,772 (or 6.5%) will be shared amongst 74 FE colleges with higher education provision. The grants are part of HEFCE's new 'National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO)', set up with BIS funding of £22 million for 2014/15 and 2015/16. 35 local networks will receive grants of around £240,000 each over the two-year period, along with further specific grants for individual providers. HEFCE has launched a website for colleges to find their nearest network, but individual networks will eventually be expected to develop and administer their own websites. The new collaborative grant comes less than four years after 'Aim Higher', (a similar scheme with the same goals, but with a much larger budget) was scrapped by the government.

### **QAA report says that FE colleges give HE students an experience that 'exceeds expectations'**

More than 144,000 students are currently studying HE programmes in FE colleges, and a recent HEFCE survey shows that 12 FE colleges are amongst the top 20 providers of HE courses rated for overall student satisfaction. A further report recently published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), based on an analysis of 45 FE colleges providing HE courses in England in 2013/14, supports this view, saying that 'The FE college environment often gives students on higher education courses a learning experience that exceeds expectations'. The QAA report goes on to say:

- A number of FE colleges show 'significant good practice in enhancing the learning experience of students on HE courses', with 10 colleges being commended for their work.
- Several colleges were commended for having a separate management structure for HE and for supporting staff involvement in applied research, which it says helps develop a HE ethos among staff and students.
- Most colleges were deemed to be providing 'quality learning opportunities' with evidence of 'strong employer engagement'.
- A number of colleges demonstrated 'good practice in how they planned courses, taught and supported students, and encouraged staff development'.

However, although only 13% were judged to be *not* meeting QAA expectations, around a third of the colleges reviewed were deemed by the QAA to require some form of improvement in respect of one or more of the following areas:

- Provision of information for students.
- Engagement with students' views.
- Partnerships with employers.
- A failure by some colleges to recognise that HE needs distinct management and governance systems.

QAA chief executive Anthony McClaran said 'FE College higher education does a great job at widening participation and increasing the range of courses students can choose to study', but went on to say 'We found that a few colleges need to focus more strongly on developing the robust higher education ethos that we rightly expect from all UK providers'.

### **University applications reach a record high**

After a large dip in university applications in the wake of big increases in tuition fees in England, figures recently published by the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) show a rising trend of more university applications, with more offers and more accepted places than ever before.

The 2014 UCAS data shows that:

- 512,400 people secured places in universities in 2014. This was up by nearly 17,000 compared to the previous year. The total number of UK students rose 3% to 447,500, with the remainder being made up of increases in the number of students from outside the UK.
- Numbers of international students from outside the EU also rose in 2014. However, there was a 12% fall in the number of students from India and a 7% fall in those from Pakistan. This is thought to be primarily because of changes to student visa rules.
- There is growing competition between universities to attract students, with 1.8 million places now being on offer. Students predicted to achieve high grades were typically getting four or five offers.
- Women are much more likely to enter university than men. This applies to women from both rich and poor families and across all regions. Among 18-year-olds, 34% of women were allocated university places, compared with 26% of men, the widest ever gender gap measured.
- While the gap between male and female is at its widest ever, the gap between rich and poor is at its lowest. The numbers of disadvantaged students getting places in higher education in 2014 rose by 11% compared with the previous year. These students were more likely to enter university with BTEC qualifications, rather than GCE A Levels. But at the other end of the scale, richer students are seven times more likely to get a place in Russell Group universities, leading to a view that the type of university attended is now becoming the key measure of social distinction.
- There are significant regional differences in university entrance. Young people in London and Northern Ireland are the most likely to enter university while those in Wales and the South West of England have the lowest entry rates.
- There is a 'worrying' ongoing fall in numbers of part-time HE students. 162,485 students enrolled on part time degree programmes in 2014, compared with 185,240 in 2013 and a peak of 314,770 in 2009.

### **Record numbers graduate with first-class honours degrees**

Data recently published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reveals that 71% of students graduating in 2014 achieved either an upper second (51%) or first class (20%) honours degree. The percentage of graduates obtaining first class degrees has now more than doubled since 2004, when about one in 10 graduates were awarded first class degrees. Some observers have suggested that, because students are now paying much higher tuition fees, they are 'working harder than ever before' to ensure that they achieved good results. However other observers have argued that the fact that more than 70% of graduates are now being awarded upper second or first class degrees is further evidence of 'grade inflation'. They go on to suggest that universities are awarding higher grades in an attempt to improve their position in the HE league tables and to maintain, or attract, more students in the face of increased competition for undergraduate numbers. As a result of this, a new system called the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) is being investigated by some universities as a way of providing a more detailed record of a student's achievements alongside their final-degree classification. Commenting on this, the chief executive of Universities UK said 'The sector has recognised for some time that the current

degree classification system is a blunt instrument’.

### **Home secretary wants foreign students to leave the UK after graduation**

Recently published official figures show that in 2014, around 121,000 non-EU students came to the UK in 2014, but only around 51,000 left. This is a trend that has been in evidence for several years and, in response, Home Secretary Theresa May has proposed new measures to ensure that foreign students leave the country once they have graduated. Launching the new measures Ms May said she wanted to move towards ‘zero net student migration’, with universities and colleges being fined and losing the right to sponsor foreign students if they do not ensure that such students return to their homelands after completing their courses. She went on to say that foreign graduates should only be able to apply for a British work permit from their country of origin. In justification for the introduction of the new measures, Ms May argues that ‘unless action is taken over foreign students remaining in Britain, the government will never reach its immigration targets’. The Liberal Democrats have objected to the proposal, with BIS Secretary Vince Cable saying that there was ‘not a chance in hell’ of it becoming law while his party is in coalition government.

### **Concerns at proposed changes to university research funding**

In the meantime Dr Cable’s department is conducting a review into the way funding for academic research is allocated. Based on an analysis of initial proposals, fears have been expressed that this could ‘spell the end of research funds for unfashionable subjects such as ancient Greek’. There are also fears that if implemented, the proposals would concentrate research funds in the hands of ‘a few elite institutions’ (such as the Russell group of universities) while newer universities lose out. Critics of the proposals, including shadow universities minister, Liam Byrne, argue that the changes being considered by BIS would ‘accentuate the creation of knowledge economy jobs in London and the south-east’, in preference to areas such as the West Midlands, the north-east and south-west of England where such jobs are needed most.

### **Counter Terrorism Bill ‘threatens academic freedom’**

Against a backdrop of rising fears over potential extremist attacks, a new Counter-Terrorism and Security Bill has been introduced and is due to go through its second reading in the House of Commons early next month (February). UK Immigration and Security Minister, James Brokenshire says that the proposed legislation is ‘a considered and targeted response to the very serious and rapidly changing threats we face’. However, clauses in the bill include a requirement for universities and FE colleges to be proactive in helping identify and prevent activities that might encourage radicalisation of students and promote campus extremism. The parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights says that this will ‘stifle academic freedom’. Hywel Francis MP, the chair of the committee, said ‘The balance between liberties and security is a difficult one to strike, but the government’s attempt in this bill to place a duty upon universities has not been well thought-through’. He went on to say that the bill was ‘counter-productive’ because ‘open and rigorous debate about ideas is one of the most powerful tools in the struggle against extremism’. A spokesperson for the University and Colleges’ Union (UCU) added to concerns, saying that ‘if the bill is enacted academics would be required to spy on their students’ and that this would ‘harm the relationships between staff and students’. Apparently dismissing these concerns, a government spokesperson said ‘We believe the bill strikes the right balance in strengthening security whilst protecting civil liberties’.

### **Shortage of school places in England could ‘soon reach a tipping point’**

The start of the 2014/15 academic year saw the National Audit Office (NAO) warning of a shortfall of 256,000 school places, mainly in primary schools, with London making up 37% of this shortfall. The Local Government Association (LGA) has now predicted that a further 880,000 additional school places will be needed over the next 8 years and that schools will ‘soon reach a tipping point with no more space or money to extend existing schools’. To help meet this extra demand, the LGA wants the government to fully fund the cost of the extra places required, which is calculated to be in excess of £12 billion. A spokesperson for the LGA said ‘We are calling on the government to commit to funding the creation of the additional school places required’ adding that ‘The scale of this crisis is too much for council taxpayers to pay for alone’. The school population bulge is most acute in the major cities, with (according to the NAO), the birth rate rising faster than at any time since the 1950s and with more than a quarter of births (26.5%) being to women born outside the UK. As perhaps might be expected, Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, blamed the crisis on the previous Labour government, saying that ‘Labour had ‘cut funding for school places during a baby boom while allowing immigration to get out of control’. Responding to the crisis, Education Secretary Nicky Morgan said that ‘£5 billion had already been spent on the creation of new places’ and that the projected

demand for extra spaces in the future would be met by building more Academies and Free Schools.

### **DfE review of extremism in schools is 'farcical' says head teacher**

The Clarke and Kershaw reports into the 'Trojan Horse' affair, along with the reports of inspections carried out by Ofsted, all appear to confirm that there was a 'co-ordinated, deliberate and sustained action by a number of individuals to introduce an intolerant and aggressive Islamic ethos' in some Birmingham Schools. The DfE has now published the findings of its own internal review into the affair, which was commissioned by former Education Secretary for England, Michael Gove. The DfE inquiry was headed by the department's most senior civil servant Chris Wormald and focused on the way in which the department had handled claims that Muslim fundamentalists had infiltrated and gained control of school governing bodies and had replaced existing head teachers, members of school management teams and individual staff with new managers and staff who held Islamist views similar to their own. Mr Wormald's report reveals that:

- Between 1994 and 2013, the DfE was contacted six times about matters relating to potential extremist infiltration in Birmingham schools.
- In 2010, two meetings were held between a DfE minister (Lord Hill), DfE officials and a Birmingham head teacher. At both of the meetings, there was a discussion about the challenges that the incursion of political Islam was posing for schools in Birmingham. Officials who were working on counter extremism were present at the second meeting and arrangements were made for a further meeting with a wider group of Birmingham head teachers. However, it appears that this meeting never happened.
- Separately to this, senior leaders at three schools in Birmingham wrote to education ministers 'expressing concern' about members of the radical Islamist group Hizb-ut-Tahrir who were 'gaining an influence over schools in the city'.
- Governors and private residents who wrote to the department expressing concern at the infiltration of governing bodies by extremists were advised to refer their concerns to the city council.

The report concluded that there had been 'individual instances where the DfE had lacked inquisitiveness on issues relating to potential extremism or the destabilisation of schools by external interests' and that the department had 'not historically treated the issue with the same robustness as it had demonstrated in dealing with warnings about, for example, child protection'. However Mr Wormald insisted that he had found no instances where 'direct warnings of extremism in Birmingham schools were received by the department and ignored' or that officials or ministers 'had been warned about violent extremism in particular schools and had failed to respond'.

One of the head teachers involved in drawing the attention of ministers and officials to the issue, has described the DfE review as 'farcical', saying that it was incomprehensible 'that such stark warnings could have been be ignored' and that ministers and officials had concluded that 'neither immediate action nor policy change needs to take place'. Responding to this, a spokesperson for the DfE said it had been difficult to take action because many of the examples given were anonymised. This was refuted, and it was pointed out that although some of the case studies provided to officials were anonymised (because other heads were worried about their names being mentioned) many of the examples the DfE had been provide with included specific names and schools. A spokesperson for the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) has now called for 'sustained support for school leaders who raise concerns about extremism' and went on to say, 'Where school leaders are taking the brave and difficult step of reporting their concerns, they have a right to expect a proactive response'.

In a written response to the report, Nicky Morgan, the current Education Secretary for England, has announced a series of new measures 'to strengthen systems within the department'. These include an increase in the DfE's Counter-Extremism Division's staffing and the introduction of a formal system for school and college staff to refer concerns about extremism to the division.

### **And finally...**

After having attended a 'Business Start-up' course at his local further education college, a budding entrepreneur was considering his next steps towards setting up and running his own business. He had learned on the course that if his business involved something he liked, there was a greater chance that it would succeed. Having reflected on this for a bit, he decided that what he liked best in the whole wide world was cheese, and therefore he set about developing his ideas for a cheese making business. He produced a business plan and went along to his local Small Business Advisory Service to talk through his ideas and to



inquire about a business start-up grant. 'This is an ambitious proposal,' said the advisor who was allotted to him, 'but I notice that you haven't given your new firm a name, nor said where it will be based'. 'Well,' said the entrepreneur 'I thought I would set up my new cheese making business in Leicester and call my cheese 'Red Leicester''. Noticing for the first time the somewhat wild gleam in the aspirant entrepreneur's eyes, the advisor cautiously said 'No, I don't think you can't do that. There's already a cheese made in Leicester and it's called 'Red Leicester'. Perhaps you might want to reflect on whether you really do want to set up a cheese-making firm and come back when you've thought it all through?'

A few weeks later the budding entrepreneur was back in the business advisor's office announcing that he had indeed thought things through and had come up with some new ideas. But when the advisor asked him what his new ideas involved, the entrepreneur replied. 'Cheese-making. I love cheese, I do'. A little perplexed by this response, the advisor said, 'But presumably you have come up with new ideas about what to call your business and where will it be located?' 'Oh yes', replied the entrepreneur, 'I'm going to set up in Wensleydale in Yorkshire and I'm going to call my cheese 'Wensleydale'. The advisor nervously pointed out that there was already a cheese made in Wensleydale that was called 'Wensleydale', and delicately went on to suggest that perhaps another name and location for his business might be better.

So the budding entrepreneur went away again, but a few weeks later was once again back in the advisor's office declaring that he was going to base his firm in Cheddar and that he would call his cheese 'Cheddar'. Unable to take his eyes away from the tiny flecks of foam that had formed in the corners of the budding entrepreneur's mouth, the advisor moved slowly towards the door, and nervously pointed out that there was a place in Somerset called Cheddar where a cheese called 'Cheddar' was already being made.

Clearly disappointed by what he considered to be the advisor's lack of encouragement, the entrepreneur left again, but sure enough, a few weeks later was back in the advisor's office. 'I've listened to what you said and I've completely changed tack' announced the entrepreneur. 'In what way?' asked the advisor cautiously, 'Are you still intending to make cheese?' 'Oh yes!' said the entrepreneur with a rapturous but slightly maniacal on his face, 'I love cheese, me' and, assuming a more menacing expression and pointing a quivering finger at the advisor said 'But *you* keep on telling me there are already lots of cheese makers in the UK, so I've decided that I'll have to set up abroad' 'And where would that be?' inquired the advisor anxiously. 'Well,' said the entrepreneur, 'the scriptures tell us 'blessed are the cheese-makers', so I'm going to set up in the holy land'. Genuinely intrigued by this, the advisor asked 'And what will you call your firm?' The entrepreneur paused, sniffed and then replied 'I'm going to call it 'Cheeses of Nazareth.'"

## **Alan Birks – January 2015**

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