

Sector Developments

You will all be probably fed up with the election by now, but the first section of this edition of the newsletter nevertheless focuses on the outcome of the election and the possible implications of this for the FE sector.

Conservatives win General Election

Confounding earlier opinion polls, the Conservatives won the general election with an overall majority of 12 seats. The results for the main parties in England, Scotland and Wales (in order of the number of seats won) were as follows:

- The Conservative Party won 331 seats with 36.9% of the total vote (34,244 votes per seat)
- The Labour Party won 232 seats with 30.4% of the total vote (40,290 votes per seat)
- The Scottish National Party (SNP) won 56 seats with 4.7% of the total vote (25,972 votes per seat)
- The Liberal Democrat Party won 8 seats with 7.9% of the total vote (301,986 votes per seat)
- Plaid Cymru won 3 seats with 1% of the total vote (60,564 votes per seat)
- UK Independence Party (UKIP) won 1 seat with 12.6% of the total vote (3,881,129 votes per seat)
- The Green Party won 1 seat with 3.9% of the total vote (1,157,613 votes per seat)

Educational background of MPs in the new House of Commons

Observers from the FE sector are now anxiously scrutinizing the new MPs in order to ascertain which, if any, might have enough empathy for FE to become champions for the sector. With regards to this data collected by the Sutton Trust on the educational background of 599 of the 650 MPs reveals that:

- 32% of all MPs were privately educated (compared with 7% of the population nationally)
- Within this total, 48% of Conservative MPs, 17% of Labour MPs, 14% of Liberal Democrat MPs, 25% of the MPs from the other smaller parties, and just 5% of Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) MPs, attended private schools
- 24% of female MPs were privately educated compared to 35% of male MPs
- 90% of MPs are university graduates, with 26% of MPs holding degrees from Oxford or Cambridge and with a further 28% having obtained degrees from other Russell Group universities

This might suggest that very few MPs will have had direct sufficient experience of FE for them to be regarded a potential advocates for sector in the new House of Commons. But then again, you never know.

Post election ministerial changes affecting education and skills

Following a cabinet reshuffle, the following ministerial changes have been made:

- Sajid Javid, has been appointed Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), replacing Vince Cable who lost his parliamentary seat in the election. Mr Javid is one of a handful of MPs who has had direct involvement with the FE sector. He is an ex-FE college student, (having attended what was Filton College) and also served as Parliamentary Private Secretary to ex-Skills Minister John Hayes. Whether this experience will make him more FE friendly (or not) is as yet unclear.
- Nick Boles will continue as Minister for Skills at BIS. Mr Boles took over as Skills and Equalities Minister last July when the previous minister, Matthew Hancock, was promoted to a cabinet post as Business and Energy minister. In addition to his other duties, Mr Boles has also been given responsibility for trade union and employment law (fueling rumours that Skills Funding Agency (SFA) funding for trade union education in FE colleges may now be at risk).
- Jo Johnson (brother of Boris) becomes Minister for Universities and Science at BIS.
- Nicky Morgan will continue as Secretary of State for Education at the Department for Education (DfE), and as Minister for Women and Equalities. Ms Morgan took over the role of Education Secretary last July from Michael Gove.
- Ed Timpson becomes Minister of State for Children and Families at the DfE.
- Priti Patel becomes Minister of State for Employment at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Opposition appointments include the following:

- Chuka Umunna will continue in his role as Shadow BIS Secretary.
- Liam Byrne remains as Shadow Minister for Skills and for Universities.
- Tristram Hunt will continue in his role as shadow Education Secretary.
- John Woodcock has replaced Yvonne Fovargue as Shadow Education Minister for Young People and takes on responsibility 14-19 apprenticeships, vocational education, youth services and careers advice.

With the exception of the new Minister for Work and Pensions, the MPs appointed to the ministerial and shadow ministerial posts above will only have responsibility for issues that affect England. This is because the devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own ministers for these issues. Policy and budget decisions in respect of FE and skills made by the new Conservative government in Westminster will therefore only apply in England.

Implications of the Conservative victory for FE and Skills in England

The implications of the election outcome for the English FE sector are yet to become clear, particularly in respect of future funding cuts. However we know that:

- Funding for full time 16-18 year old students is *not* protected. (This means that the current 22% difference in funding between pre-16 and 16-18 provision is almost certain to continue for the foreseeable future).
- Other than for the expansion of apprenticeships, BIS funding is not protected (and more ominously, the civil servants who advised former BIS Secretary Vince Cable that savings could be made by 'killing off FE' are presumably still in their posts).
- Government proposals in respect of the introduction of English Baccalaureates and reforms to GCSE, GCE A Level and AS Level will now go ahead.

We also know that the Conservative Party election manifesto says that:

- Three million additional apprenticeships will be created by 2020. (This is around 50% more than in the past 5 years). The Conservatives say that some of the funding for this will come from fines imposed on banks for malpractice, some will come from savings obtained by lowering the cap on the maximum that can be received in benefits from £26,000 per year to £23,000 per year, and some will come from removing the ability of under 21 year olds on jobseekers allowance to claim housing benefit. The rest will come from whatever is left of the BIS budget after the other expected cuts have been made.
- FE will be 'improved' through the opening of further new National Colleges.
- A university technical college (UTC) will be established 'within reach of every city'.
- 500 new Free Schools will be established (although hopefully not in the premises that ailing FE colleges have been evicted from in the wake of their closure).
- Young people will be required to continue to study mathematics and English to age 18.
- It will *not* be mandatory for teachers (including FE teachers) to be qualified.
- The cap on the numbers of students that higher education institutions (HEIs) can recruit will be lifted.

These developments will add to the pressures the FE sector is already facing, which include the following:

- Virtually all LEA maintained schools, free schools, academies, UTCs, studio schools etc., if they haven't already done so, will be in the process of establishing their own sixth forms. This will inevitably make it more difficult for FE and sixth form colleges to compete fairly with schools for 16-18 year old students. Schools have a vested interest in persuading their pupils to stay on in the sixth form, and the more success they have with this, the more FE and sixth form college 16-18 enrolment numbers will decline.
- Continuing cuts to SFA adult skills funding, combined with the likelihood that FE loans for 19-23 year olds, or for other adults wanting to take courses at Level 2 and below will *not* be introduced any time soon, can only be expected to impact negatively on FE college 19+ enrolments.
- The lifting of the cap on HE recruitment is likely to negatively affect FE College HE enrolments, as colleges face more competition from universities for HE students.
- The government's preference is for employers to control the increased government spending on apprenticeships, along with funding for schemes such as the 'Employer Ownership of Skills' initiative.
- Some of the funding that would otherwise have been expected to go to FE colleges will inevitably be siphoned off to help pay for more 'national colleges'.

- Any FE and skills funding made available in the future is likely to become subject to increasing levels of 'contestability'. With lower costs and less advantageous conditions of service for their staff compared to FE colleges, this is likely to give private trainers a competitive advantage in bidding for funds.

Unless colleges can adapt sufficiently to withstand these pressures, the future for FE, and for those that work in it, will become increasingly bleak. The harsher financial climate will mean that most colleges will have no option but to cut more courses and make even more of their staff redundant. The pressure on college finances is likely to mean that the severance packages for the staff affected are more likely to be at the basic statutory minimum. Staff employed on 'zero-hours' contracts will be lucky to receive any severance pay at all. (A 'zero-hours' contract usually refers to a casual relationship where an employer recruits a 'worker', rather than an 'employee'. Only 'employees' are legally covered by redundancy rules).

Meanwhile, MPs who lost their parliamentary seats in the election (such as Vince Cable, David Laws and Ed Balls) will receive one month's salary for every year they served as an MP up to a maximum of six months. For a backbench MP who has served for six years, this equates to £33,350. In addition, outgoing MPs are allocated a 'winding up budget' of £53,950 (increasing to £57,150 for MPs representing London constituencies). At age 55, MPs can access a pension of either 1/40th or 1/50th of their final pensionable salary for each year of pensionable service, depending on the personal contribution rate they have chosen.

FE sector representatives respond to the Conservative election victory

After offering their congratulations to the new incoming government, the leaders of the various groups and associations that purport to represent the FE sector have given their reactions to the Conservative victory.

- A spokesperson for Association of Colleges (AoC) said, 'we are deeply concerned that the Conservatives are the only main party not to pledge to ring-fence funding for 16-18 year olds'. Perhaps stating the obvious, the spokesperson went on to say 'This leaves college students extremely vulnerable to further cuts'. Commenting on the new government's pledge to create 3 million additional apprenticeships by 2020, the spokesperson said, 'We simply can't afford to put all of education and training eggs in the apprenticeship basket', and with reference to the expected further cuts to the adult skills budget, went on to repeat the AoC's earlier warning that if the government continued with funding cuts at the same rate 'adult education and training in England will not exist by 2020'.
- A spokesperson for the 157 Group, said that member colleges were 'strongly demonstrating the undoubted contribution of FE to the economy in a way that we hope will be hard to resist within the Treasury', and went on to say that 157 Group officers 'would be engaging with new Conservative ministers on behalf of our member colleges as soon as possible'. Going off in a somewhat different direction, the spokesperson also said, 'we will be working hard to ensure that colleges are given genuine freedoms in order that they can continue to be responsive to the needs of local communities and employers'. (See the section on '*157 Group calls for more powers for FE colleges*' below).
- A spokesperson for the Sixth Form Colleges' Association (SFCA) echoed the AoC's comments and said, 'we are deeply concerned that the Conservatives are the only major party that said they wouldn't protect 16-19 funding in real terms'. The spokesperson went on to say 'We are now resigned to the fact that the A-level reforms will be here to stay'.
- A spokesperson for the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), said 'There is a strong cross-party consensus about the skills and employment challenges we face as a country as we strive for sustained and inclusive economic growth', and that NIACE had set out its 'priorities for the new Government's first 100 days in our Ten Policies for Ten People (Ten4Ten) proposals'.
- A spokesperson for the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) said 'We welcome the fact that government wishes to grow high quality apprenticeships and that these should be available across all levels and all ages', pointing out that the AELP's own manifesto 'already reflected the new government's plans for greater integration of employment and skills'.
- A spokesperson for the University and College Union (UCU) said 'The return of a Conservative majority means the sector must redouble its efforts in making the case for FE'.

Are we really 'all in it together'?

How, you will no doubt be asking, will the HE and schools sector fare under the new government? The university sector in England appears to be awash with cash from the increased fees paid to universities up front by BIS on behalf of students. This is technically regarded as a loan, which may (or may not) eventually

be repaid by the student. However, universities are likely to be unconcerned as to whether it is BIS or the individual student who stumps up the cash, as long as they continue to get it. Also, the lifting of the cap on the recruitment of HE student numbers means that the universities will, in the future, be collecting even more in tuition fees. Alongside this, not only does the schools sector continue to be protected from funding cuts, it has also been the beneficiary of £billions in capital funding ploughed into new free schools, academies, UTCs, studio schools, etc. Even more capital funding will be made available through the new government's pledge to create 500 new Free Schools and to 'place a UTC within reach of every city'.

Sadly, it would therefore seem that almost the entire burden of both past and future cuts in education spending in England, is being borne by the FE/SFC sector. This is bound, once again, to raise questions about the level of effectiveness of the various groups and associations who are paid significant sums in fees and subscriptions each year in return for representing, defending and protecting the FE sector's interests.

Public Spending

George Osborne has announced that he intends to present a 'Budget for working people' on July 8. The summer Budget will apparently 'set out the government's plan to deliver the savings identified in the election campaign'. This involves £13 billion of 'non-protected' departmental spending cuts, £12 billion of welfare cuts and an attempt to raise £5 billion of extra revenue from a crackdown on tax avoidance. In what will be his second budget this year, the Chancellor is expected to quantify the scale of the cuts in public services and welfare payments, and ministers in the non-protected departments have been given around 8 weeks to draw up their proposals for reducing expenditure. Treasury sources say the expectation is that the savings will be found from day-to-day running costs rather than from capital projects, but it would be up to departments to come up with suggestions. One insider has apparently told the Financial Times newspaper that there will be 'deep cuts to those departments whose budgets are not ring-fenced', and has warned that it is 'all going to be very bloody indeed'. The insider went on to say that 'even some Tory MPs fear the public will be taken aback by the scale of the cuts'.

The spending plans that Mr Osborne set out in his previous budget in March involved achieving £30 billion in Departmental spending cuts in just two years (2016/17 and 2017/18). These cuts were to be made from £150 billion (or 20%) of Departmental spending that is unprotected. Because of commitments made during the election campaign (eg to spend 2% of GDP on defence, and promises made prior to the Scottish independence referendum that the Barnett formula subsidy would be retained and that the Smith Commission recommendations for the devolution of further spending would be implemented), some observers say that this will be very difficult for the Chancellor to achieve without imposing cuts to non-protected departments of in excess of 20%. Mr Osborne says that continuing low interest rates on Government debt and future cuts to benefits will mitigate the size of any additional cuts needed, but others say that Mr Osborne has little room for manoeuvre because of the Conservative manifesto pledge to turn the UK's budget deficit (forecast to be £75 billion in 2015/16) into a surplus by 2018/19. Meanwhile, the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimates that by the time the spending squeeze is over in 2017/18, the budgets of unprotected Whitehall departments will have been cut by more than a third.

BIS is one of the non-protected departments and, apart from increased spending on apprenticeships, the rest of the BIS budget will be vulnerable to further spending cuts. University research funding, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is likely to be maintained, and with the cap on HE recruitment being lifted, much more in loan funding will be required. It is therefore probable that FE, and in particular adult FE, will once again bear the brunt of BIS spending cuts. The consequences of this will be dramatic. The expected cut of 20% in the overall BIS budget will mean a further reduction in spending of £2.6 billion, which is more than the entire SFA non-apprenticeship revenue budget.

Pre-2012 student loans are to be sold to the private sector.

This year will see the first crop of graduates since higher levels of tuition fees of up to £9,000 per year were introduced in England in 2012. When maintenance loans are included, these new graduates are expected to leave university with average debts totaling around £40,000. However, students were taking out government loans to help them with their fees and maintenance well before 2012.

The pre-1998 student loan book, estimated as being worth around £900 million, has already been sold off to private debt collectors, who paid around £160 million for it and George Osborne has now announced that

the pre-2012 student loan book is also to be sold to the private sector (along with government stakes in Eurostar, Lloyds and 'UK Asset Resolution' assets). This is part of an attempt to raise £23 billion which will be used to help pay down the £1.5 trillion national debt. The National Union of Students (NUS) has expressed concerns that the pre-2012 student loan book could also be sold off for much less than it is worth, and that interest rates could be increased by the private sector buyers (making the debt harder to pay off) and that the 30 years limit on the amount of time a graduate can spend paying off their student loan could be reduced. With the advent of 24+ Advanced Learning Loans and the possible extension of these loans to those aged 19-23, future loan sell-offs could also become a matter of concern for FE students

More 'sell offs' to come?

The 'sell off' of student loan debt to the private sector has given rise to concerns that the government may be considering other education 'sell offs'. The creeping encroachment of the private sector into the delivery of FE and Skills, combined with the increasing numbers of FE colleges experiencing severe financial problems (usually as a consequence of continuous funding cuts) has prompted speculation that the government may be considering the possibility of encouraging private sector firms to acquire and take over the running of ailing FE colleges. If this were to be the case, hopefully the government will get better value for money from the sale of FE assets than was the case with the sale of the pre-1998 student loan book, or when, in 2013, the Royal Mail was sold off to the private sector at a loss the National Audit Office, estimates to be in the region of almost £2 billion.

Does BIS have a future?

It may not only be the future of FE that is under threat. Rumours are circulating that BIS may be scrapped and that its functions will be transferred to other government departments, such as the DfE and the DWP. A recent study carried out by the Taxpayers' Alliance (which has close links to the Conservative Party) argues that getting rid of BIS would save £billions in public spending. Sajid Javid is also said to have been receptive the idea of getting rid of BIS when he worked at the Treasury (where he allegedly hung a photograph of his heroine, Margaret Thatcher, on the wall). Whether having now been appointed as BIS Secretary will cause him to change his mind on this, remains to be seen.

Speaking to journalists after the election, Labour MP Adrian Bailey, who chaired the BIS Select Committee during the last parliament said 'Looking at the scale of the cuts that are coming down the line, it is difficult to see how BIS can survive in its current shape'. He appears to be supported in this view by Graham Stuart, the Conservative MP who chaired the Education Select Committee in the last parliament. More recently the Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan was asked whether responsibility for universities (which currently comes under BIS) was likely to change hands in the near future. Ms Morgan declined to comment, saying that this decision was 'very much a matter for the prime minister. The government's forthcoming spending review will no doubt provide more clarity on the future, assuming there is one, of BIS.

Scottish MPs to vote on England only education and skills issues

In addition to electing 129 MSPs to the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, Scotland also elects 59 MPs to the UK government in Westminster. Most of what would normally be an MP's constituency workload in England is, however, undertaken by the relevant MSPs in Scotland. The 56 SNP Westminster MPs had hoped to hold the balance of power with a minority Labour government, but the Conservative overall majority has prevented this and, since Scottish MPs have no vote in respect of devolved Scottish issues, the SNP MPs in Westminster say that they will voting on English only issues instead. They apparently intend to spend remainder of their the time in Westminster flouting parliamentary protocol, for example by taking photographs of themselves in the Commons Chamber (including 'selfies' leaning on the prime minister's dispatch box), giving the Speaker a round of applause when he reminded them that clapping during debates was not allowed, evicting the remaining Liberal Democrat MPs from offices the party have occupied for more than a century, mounting a bizarre attempt to force 83 year old veteran Labour MP Dennis Skinner out of his customary front-bench seat, and engaging in other antics described by the longest serving MP and 'Father of the House' Gerald Kaufman, as 'offensive' and 'infantile'.

How Scottish votes might impact on FE, skills and education in England, if indeed it does at all, is unclear. But if SNP MPs do choose to exercise their right to vote on English issues, this will not be the first time that MPs from Scotland have done so. For example, the previous Labour government was only able to pass the legislation needed introduce (and then subsequently increase) tuition fees for English university students

with the support of Scottish Labour MPs. This was in spite of the fact that their counterpart MSPs in the Scottish Parliament voted (and continue to vote) for university tuition to remain free for Scottish university students. In another example of this, Scottish Labour MPs also voted for the introduction of NHS Trusts in England, although MSPs rejected this in Scotland.

Other developments that may be of interest to readers

DfE Vocational Immersion Programme

The DfE has launched a new Vocational Immersion Programme (VIP) for its civil servants. The programme will provide officials with an opportunity to voluntarily spend up to three days in an FE college in England, shadowing a member of the senior management team. A spokesperson for the DfE says that the scheme is intended to 'enable the officials to gain first-hand experience of what it is like to work in a college and to better understand the issues facing the FE sector'. The DfE will choose the colleges the officials will spend time at (and will ensure a 'regional spread'). The DfE spokesperson offered assurances that the VIP was 'purely for the benefit of DfE officials', and was 'not in any way an inspection, nor any form of checking up on colleges or college managers'. Given the sheer volume of other inspections, audits and checks that colleges and their managers are already subjected to, it probably wouldn't make much difference if it were.

157 Group calls for more powers for FE colleges

A report published jointly by the 157 Group and the law firm Eversheds calls for colleges to be given greater flexibility and autonomy. The report argues that, given the funding cuts expected in the coming years, the 'freedoms provided by the Education Act 2011 have failed to deliver the flexibility that colleges need if they are to have a sustainable future'. It goes on to say that existing powers of college corporations, some of which date back to 1992, 'do not cater adequately for innovations that some colleges would like to implement'. Examples of these 'innovations' include proposals for colleges to be able 'to operate in a similar manner to multi-academy trusts, or with the degree of autonomy enjoyed by universities, or even as private companies', all of which the report says, have thus far been 'resisted by ministers'. The report also says that 'although the government is entitled to regulate on use of public funding and basic standards of quality, more emphasis should be placed on the accountability of colleges to their local stakeholders, who were better placed than the government to ensure that colleges were meeting their needs'. (Some observers have suggested that whatever the new government's plans are for the future of FE might be, giving colleges more freedoms and flexibilities might not be very high up on the list, although a much greater degree of private sector involvement in the delivery of FE might be).

'Obsession' with apprenticeships gives cause for concern

Increasing the level of public spending on apprenticeships is the one policy objective that all the main political parties seem share. Prior to the election, the Conservatives pledged to create an extra three million apprenticeships, Labour promised an apprenticeship for every young person who 'gets the grades' and the Liberal Democrats promised to double the number of employers offering apprenticeships. However, concern is now being expressed that apprenticeships have become a political 'obsession' that is resulting in the decimation of other FE provision for young people and adults who may have different education and training needs. Concerns are also being expressed about the extent to which some apprenticeships really do provide young people and adults with the competences needed to obtain, and to hold down, a full time job. Critics make reference to the fact that it has not been all that long ago that it was possible for a person to complete an 'apprenticeship' in just 13 weeks. Even today, the minimum of one year's duration for an apprenticeship seems a long way from the 5 or more years needed to complete the apprenticeships seen in the UK until a few decades ago, and which can still be seen in some European competitor countries.

Impact of continued study of English and mathematics for 16-18 year olds as a 'funding condition'

Last year, the Education Funding Agency (EFA) announced that in England, any student aged 16-18 without a GCSE grade C or above pass in English and mathematics would be required to continue to study these subjects in the attempt to achieve these grades (or similar grades in an equivalent 'stepping stone' qualification, e.g. Functional Skills). The EFA also made this requirement a 'condition of funding' that had to be met in order for colleges and other providers to be eligible to continue to receive EFA payments for those students. The EFA has now announced that, from August 2015, the condition of funding will be revised, so that those with a GCSE at *Grade D* in these subjects, must continue studying towards achieving a GCSE Grade C (or higher) in these subjects, rather than equivalent 'stepping stone' qualifications

To help increase the number of specialist English and mathematics teachers needed to deliver this, the government has awarded 650 initial teacher training bursaries to new graduates in these subjects and more than 3,250 existing teachers have benefited from English and mathematics enhancement programmes.

With reference to the effectiveness of the changes, data covering 2012/13 and 2014/15 shows that:

- Enrolments in both English and mathematics have significantly increased (e.g. in GCSE English by 53% and in GCSE mathematics by 36%).
- Attainment of GCSE A*-C and other Level 2 equivalent qualifications in English and mathematics by the age of 19 increased from 65.8% to 67.7%. (For GCSE A*-C only, it increased from 59.5% to 62.1%).
- The progression rate for the young people who failed to achieve GCSE A*-C, or another Level 2 qualification in English and mathematics at age 16, but who had subsequently achieved both by age 19 increased from 16.4% to 16.9%. (However, for GCSE A*-C only, it fell from 9.5% to 9.1%).

Number of 16-24 year olds not in employment, education or training (NEET) is at a 5-year low

The latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) report show that in the first quarter of 2015, there were 943,000 16-24 year old NEETs. This is a reduction of 20,000 (2%) from the period October to December 2014 and a reduction of 45,000 (5%) from the same quarter last year. Against this, between the last quarter of 2014 and the first quarter of 2015, the number of NEETs aged 16-18 increased by around 1,000 to 134,000. However, the figures mean that the proportion of all 16-24 year olds that were NEET during the first three months of 2015 was 13%, which is the lowest number in any quarter in the last five years.

Ofsted and college financial health

There have been recent examples of colleges being judged by Ofsted as 'outstanding' for Leadership and Management during an inspection, and then, just a few weeks later, being placed into 'Administered Status' by the FE Commissioner because of concerns about the state of the college's finances. No doubt a bit embarrassed by all this, Ofsted is now taking more interest in the state of college finances, and says that institutions that are financially weak may not be able to sustain high quality provision in the future, and that deteriorating financial health may be a sign of ineffective governance. The AoC has challenged Ofsted on its new stance, saying that:

- It is poorly explained (with just a single line on finances in the current Inspection Handbook).
- Overall effectiveness is downgraded where financial health is poor but not upgraded where it is good.
- A judgment about the possible *future* impact of financial health on quality is speculative, not factual.
- Factors other than governance can cause financial health to deteriorate (e.g. endless funding cuts)
- The approach taken with colleges in weak financial health is not comparable with that in 11-18 schools

Nevertheless, it is expected that college finances will be given greater prominence in the inspection handbook, and in the new Common Inspection Framework (CIF) to be introduced this September.

Ofsted Inspection Grades

48 colleges were inspected between 1 September 2014 and 1 May 2015. Of these, Ofsted judged 63% to be either 'inadequate' or 'requires' improvement. This is a statistic that will no doubt cause the BIS civil servants who recommended 'getting rid of FE' to be rubbing their hands. Grades awarded are as follows:

| <i>Grade</i> | <i>Number of Colleges</i> |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 – Outstanding | 1 (2%) |
| 2 – Good | 17 (35%) |
| 3 - Requires Improvement | 23 (48%) |
| 4 – Inadequate | 7 (15%) |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>48</i> |

Ofsted to scrap graded lesson observations

Ofsted has announced that, after detailed 'consultation with FE and skills providers', graded lesson observations for FE inspections will be scrapped with effect from this September. An Ofsted spokesperson said that the decision had been made following 'numerous pilot inspections to test the changes'. Details of the change will be included in Ofsted's new handbook for the inspection of FE and skills, which Ofsted says

'will be published before the end of the summer term'.

QAA publishes 'toolkit' to help FE colleges offering HE courses

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has recently published a document entitled 'A College Higher Education Toolkit: Engaging with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education'. The aim of the QAA toolkit is assist FE colleges offering HE courses to make better use of the 'Quality Code for Higher Education'. The QAA toolkit also includes good practice case studies and other useful resources. The QAA says that the toolkit is essential reading for the managers of any FE college involved in a future QAA quality review.

Universities and social mobility

It has long been argued that a small number of elite universities serve as narrow gateways to top jobs in business, the professions and in politics. However in recent years, the extent to which social mobility is aided (or hindered) by higher education has been given more political prominence. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission chaired by Alan Milburn pointed out that between 2002/03 and 2011/12 the percentage of state-educated young people at Russell Group universities fell, and that a privately educated child was ten times more likely to be admitted to Oxbridge at age 19 than a child who attended a state secondary school. The trebling of HE tuition fees in England in 2012 led to fears that applications to English universities from disadvantaged young people might collapse (where 'disadvantaged' is defined as being in receipt of free school meals in year 11 at school). However, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) reported that for the 2014 admissions cycle, not only were more young people in England going to university than ever before (more than 500,000), more students from disadvantaged backgrounds were attending universities. In addition to this, the UCAS claimed that disadvantaged young applicants entering Russell Group universities in 2014 had increased by 13% compared to the previous year, and had increased by 40% more compared with the position in 2010.

However, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) says that the 2014 UCAS data is statistically misleading, and that although there was an increase in the number of students from all backgrounds admitted to university in 2014, only 4,040 entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds were admitted to Russell Group universities, compared with 3,105 in 2010. As a proportion of total admissions, the 40% increase in admissions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds between 2010 and 2014 claimed by UCAS amounts to less than 1% (from 2.3% to 3.2% overall). OFFA also says that the decline in the numbers of part-time HE students has been caused by disproportionately lower numbers of applications from people who are less well off.

The Russell Group does not fully accept the arguments made by the Commission or OFFA and argue instead that 'The reason why too few students from disadvantaged backgrounds apply to leading universities is that they are not achieving the right grades in the right subjects at school', and that they are not being given the right advice on which subjects to take. They go on to argue that 'attainment, advice and aspirations must all be dramatically improved if the real barriers to fair access are to be removed'. The Russell Group is also opposed to the imposition of quotas for the recruitment of disadvantaged students, saying that this 'would undermine the autonomy of universities in managing their own admissions'. Meanwhile in the rest of the HE sector, vice-chancellors have expressed concerns about defining improvements in social mobility solely in terms of the numbers of poor students attending elite institutions, and that 'the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend universities across the UK, rather than not attending university at all, is ultimately a much more powerful force for social change'.

Preventing radicalisation and extremism in schools and colleges

With the blessing of the DfE and Home Office, the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) has published official advice for colleges on how to prevent students being radicalised by extremists and terror groups. The advice is made available on a new website that contains online training and resources to support the FE sector in delivering the government's 'Prevent' Duty, which aims to stop people being drawn into terrorism. The resources include notes for management and teaching staff, guidance for support staff such as librarians and security staff, examples of good practice in policies and risk assessments, and information for governors. The ETF is also developing an online training module for all FE staff to raise awareness of the Prevent Duty and the statutory requirement for colleges to promote 'British values' that will come into force on July 1. In addition to the ETF resources, and presumably unconcerned by accusations of unnecessary duplication, earlier this month the 157 Group of colleges and the AELP launched their own anti-radicalisation toolkit for colleges and other providers.

Meanwhile, delegates attending the recent National Association of Head Teachers' (NAHT) annual conference in Liverpool heard that problems associated with the 'Trojan Horse' affair, (which alleged that hardline Muslim groups had undermined head teachers and taken over schools in Birmingham) remain largely unresolved. Head teachers affected said that some schools still faced pressure from organised groups, particularly on issues such as tackling homophobia, and that intimidation is still continuing. Examples of this intimidation included such things as physical threats made on social media, petitions outside schools objecting to teachers teaching against homophobia and even dead dogs hung on school gates and dismembered cats being left in school playgrounds. Sarah Hewitt-Clarkson, head of Anderton Park School in Birmingham spoke of being threatened herself with physical violence if the curriculum of the school included anti-homophobic and other 'liberal' elements. She went on to say 'Trojan Horse has not gone away' and warned that the problems 'could easily start up again' because 'all the behaviours and issues we saw before are still there'.

Despite the high profile investigations and reports following the Trojan horse affair, head teachers said that 'the response had been inadequate'. For example, although some school governors had been removed, none of those removed had been barred from being governors of other schools. One head teacher told the conference 'Despite all the evidence, not one single governor implicated in the Trojan horse scandal has been investigated or even banned. Where is the justice in that?' Delegates subsequently passed a motion calling for the establishment of a national register of governors who have been removed for misconduct. It was argued that such a register 'would help schools and local authorities to stop these people from becoming governors of other schools' (and in some cases governors in multiple schools). Responding to head teachers' concerns, Education Secretary Nicky Morgan said 'This is a reminder of how serious this issue is, and that it is something that is not going to be solved overnight'.

Schools need more support to cope with rising numbers of pupils who do not speak English

The ONS has reported that 641,000 people arrived in the UK legally last year. (There is no data for the numbers that arrived illegally). The ONS said that this was a 'statistically significant increase' from 526,000 in 2013 and, for example, that one in three people now living in London were born outside the UK. There were increases in both people coming to the UK from the EU (up 67,000 to 268,000) and from outside the EU (up 42,000 to 290,000). Against this, 323,000 people left the UK in 2014, resulting in a record net immigration figure of 318,000. Irrespective of the arguments for and against immigration, with reference to the education infrastructure, the Local Government Association (LGA) estimates that around a further 1 million primary school places will be needed over the next 5 years, with two in five local authorities warning that there will be a critical shortage of primary school places as early as September next year.

Although there are significant regional variations, the latest DfE statistics show that 18.7% of all primary pupils (almost one in five) are classed as non-native English language speakers. In secondary schools, the proportion is 14.3% (almost one in eight). Speaking at the recent Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) conference in Liverpool, Joy Wilson said 'UK schools are educating a rising number of students for whom English is an additional language (EAL), and this continues to rise day by day'. She went on to say that 'pressure on teachers meant that some pupils' education was under threat', and that teachers 'did not have the training, resources, classroom support (e.g. translators) or the time they needed to handle these pupils, many of whom arrive in schools with other complex issues such as communication disorders, autism and other learning difficulties'. Ms Wilson said that schools 'desperately needed extra funding to train and support teachers to meet the needs of this growing group of learners'. Heather Emerson, a teacher from Salford, said 'we should remember that it is hard not just for the teachers but for the children as well. Sometimes we can't communicate with them except via pictures'. Chris McGovern, chair of the Campaign for State Education, and a former head teacher, said 'we don't need to worry about children with English as a second language. They will leave school bilingual and perform very well. The danger lies with the bottom 25% of monolingual pupils, the white, working class, who don't get the attention they need to succeed'.

The debate concluded with a conference motion being passed calling on the government to provide more funding for those schools with increasing numbers of pupils who do not have English as a first language. Given the new government's focus on reducing public expenditure, it is by no means certain that the additional funding requested will be made available. If the experience of the FE sector is anything to go by, the almost exponential increase in demand for English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) courses and other support for EAL students has been matched by cuts in inverse proportion to the growth in demand.

And finally...

A Polish builder recently arrived in the UK was attending his local FE College in order to take the test needed to obtain a Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) card. (This is the card that all builders must obtain before they are allowed to work on construction sites). The assessor who was about to conduct the test turned to a colleague and disparagingly said 'I doubt that this bloke knows the difference between girders and joists'. This was overheard by the Polish builder, who retorted 'Oh yes I do!' and, to the consternation of the assessor, went on to say 'Everyone in Poland knows that Goethe wrote Faust, and Joyce wrote Ulysses'.

Alan Birks – May 2015

*As usual, the views and opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those held by **Click CMS Ltd***

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