

Financial risks to FE must be addressed

“The government has been desperately slow off the mark to tackle a looming crisis in further education” claimed Meg Hillier (Labour) MP, Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, on the publication of the [Committee's report](#) voicing concerns about the financial sustainability and future of FE in England.

The report says that the declining financial health of many FE colleges has potentially serious consequences for learners and local economies, but the bodies responsible for funding and oversight have been slow to address the problem.

The Public Accounts Committee urges government to take a more proactive approach in helping FE colleges prepare for the “significant financial challenges they face in the likely event of further funding cuts”.

The report also claims:

- Funding and oversight bodies have taken decisions without understanding the cumulative impact that these decisions have on colleges and their learners.

- Oversight arrangements are complex, sometimes overlapping, and too focused on intervening when financial problems have already become serious rather than helping to prevent them in the first place.
- The government appears to see area-based reviews of post-16 education as a fix-all solution to the current problems, but the reviews do not cover all types of provider and it is not clear how they will deliver a robust and financially sustainable sector.

In response to the report, Skills Minister Nick Boles said the government had “protected funding for further education and will be increasing real-term spending by more than a third in the next five years”.

The Public Accounts Committee scrutinises the value for money - the economy, efficiency and effectiveness - of public spending and holds the government and its civil servants to account for the delivery of public services.

Schools will be forced by law to raise awareness of vocational routes to higher skills

A [new law](#) is to be introduced to allow apprenticeship providers and staff from colleges to visit schools as part of careers advice.

The move follows concerns that some schools may only be recommending apprenticeships or other technical and professional routes to the lowest-achieving pupils - effectively creating a 2-tiered system of careers advice.

The new legislation will mean schools will be required by law to collaborate with colleges, university technical colleges and other training providers to ensure that young people are aware of all the routes to higher skills and the workplace, including higher and degree apprenticeships.

Timetable for Functional Skills consultation revealed

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) has released [information on the next stage](#) of its forthcoming review of maths and English Functional Skills qualifications.

It has been confirmed that two consultations will be published, each with a slightly different focus.

The first (January to April) is aimed primarily at employers focusing on which maths and English skills employers require. This information will help inform a revised set of National Adult Literacy and Numeracy Standards.

The second (May to June) will cover further consultation

with the sector and technical experts.

The ETF intends to present a report to Ministers by the end of August 2016 with a view to reformed qualifications being ready to teach by September 2018.

As reported in October's [OCR Policy Briefing](#), the review of Functional Skills was commissioned by the Skills Minister Nick Boles, with the aim of proposing new qualifications “better suited to the needs of industry, practitioners and learners in post-16 education”.

Interest in the consultation can be registered [here](#).

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AS Level proving more popular than initially thought – for now

Almost three quarters of schools are intending to offer de-coupled AS exams in summer 2016 according to recent research from UCAS.

The A and AS Level [survey results](#) show common reasons for continuing with the AS include: its usefulness as a measure of progress; the availability of an exam should students drop a subject after one year; maintenance of a breadth of study; and support for predicted grades.

Key findings from the survey:

- 59% of schools/colleges will offer the AS in all subjects in 2015 (up from 52% in the previous UCAS survey published in January 2015). 74% will offer the AS in some form.
- Independent schools were less likely to offer the AS

- qualification than state schools and academies.
- 64% of respondents intend to revisit their decision about AS provision in 2017, once all A Level subjects are reformed.
- 49% of respondents did not feel they had sufficient information about qualification reform when making decisions on future provision.
- There is a high level of individuality behind decisions made by schools and colleges.
- University entry was the second most common key driver behind maintaining the AS. However, this was to a lesser extent than shown in the previous survey.

UCAS continues to encourage universities to produce statements detailing how they are adapting to the changing qualification landscape. 40 of these statements are currently available on the [UCAS website](#).

School performance tables are changing

The latest school performance tables signal a change in the way schools will be judged in future.

[Figures published](#) this month from the Department for Education show that around 10% of secondary schools opted for the new performance measure – Progress 8 – a year early.

[Progress 8](#) looks at the progress pupils make between Key Stage 2 tests taken at the end of primary school and their performance across 8 specified subjects at the end

of secondary school. Schools are given a score based on how their pupils have progressed compared to the national average.

Progress 8 will become the main measurement for all secondary schools in the 2016 performance tables.

This will replace the measure of 5 or more GCSEs at A* - C which was used for the last time in this month's tables.

“Bold ambitions” for English Education

New proposals call for more robust benchmarks of performance and improvements in assessing attainment over time.

CentreForum, the research think tank aiming to influence national policy, has published [proposals](#) for the progress it thinks pupils should make over the next 15 years. This consultative document seeks to initiate debate about expectations and standards in the English education system.

In the introduction to the proposals, David Laws, Executive Chairman of Centre Forum and former Schools Minister, says that more time needs to be given to debating what the education system is trying to achieve: “Education is about more than attainment in examinations, but attainment is one of the most important measures of how our education system is performing”.

According to the proposals, when Grade 5 becomes the new GCSE ‘benchmark’, the proportion of pupils achieving a ‘good pass’ in English and maths is expected to drop from around 58% to 35%. “At age 16, we think most pupils can and should achieve an average of a Grade 5 in their [Progress] 8 subjects and this will be the new benchmark of national success. We have set a proposed goal that across England at least 75% of children should eventually achieve this level.”

[Responding to the proposals](#), Ofsted Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, applauded the CentreForum’s ambitions for GCSEs, but added that those pupils not pursuing an academic path should not be forgotten. Sir Michael calls for the education system to be rebalanced with more high-quality vocational and technical education and clear alternatives to higher education.

Summer 2015: standards were maintained says Ofqual

Ofqual is satisfied that exam boards have maintained standards in GCSEs and A Levels in summer 2015.

In its general round-up [reports](#) on summer 2015, Ofqual covers a number of issues that exam boards are required to manage to reduce the impact of potential problems and deliver a successful series. The issues include malpractice, question paper errors, security breaches, awarding, results and many more.

Two additional, detailed reports have also been produced:

- **Access arrangements in exams** – This is in response to requests for further information, particularly about the use of access arrangements by different types of school. Ofqual will be seeking further data and discussing emerging trends with exam boards and those representing schools and colleges.
- **Inter-board comparability** – Ofqual concludes that, with respect to grade standards within a subject, there is no discernible advantage or disadvantage in entering students with different exam boards.

Call for arts subjects in the EBacc

Prominent figures in the arts are supporting the '[Bacc for the Future](#)' campaign.

The campaign believes that the take-up of creative qualifications will continue to fall if current plans for the EBacc performance measure go ahead.

In a letter to *The Times* newspaper, supporters urge ministers to think again about the list of GCSE subjects included in the EBacc - English, mathematics, sciences,

history or geography, and a language. "The arts would be squeezed out of schools altogether" says the letter, going on to point out the benefits of the creative industries to the UK's economy.

As reported in November's [OCR Policy Briefing](#), the DfE is currently consulting on how the government will fulfil its manifesto commitment that the vast majority of pupils currently in year 7 should, in five years' time, be entered for the EBacc at GCSE.

New commissioner aims to "challenge all schools to perform better"

A new National Schools Commissioner has been appointed by the Department for Education.

Sir David Carter, currently the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) for the South West, will take up his post at the end of January 2016, succeeding Frank Green, the current Schools Commissioner.

Sir David will play a key role in the government's education reforms, leading the team of 8 [RSCs](#) to tackle underperformance in schools across the country. This will include:

- Improving the performance of underperforming academies and free schools
- Intervening in failing and coasting local authority schools

- Supporting the creation of new academies and free schools
- Recruiting high-quality academy sponsors.

Sir David Carter previously worked as the CEO of the Cabot Learning Federation, one of the first multi-academy trusts in the country.

Meanwhile, the Education Select Committee [has called for improvements](#) in the transparency, accountability and working relationships of RSCs. Neil Carmichael, Chair of the Committee, believes that the "oversight system is now confused and fragmented", and urges RSCs to do more to develop their work with schools and other key stakeholders to improve the education and outcomes of young people.

Regional inequality in education highlighted

An independent, cross-party group of politicians and education experts is examining the causes and effects of inequality in education at primary and secondary levels in England and Wales.

The Social Market Foundation's [Commission on Inequality in Education](#) believes that inequalities are a barrier to social mobility and result in unfairness. The commission seeks to close the gap between the performance of disadvantaged children and their better-off classmates.

The commission has published new [research](#) looking at inequalities in today's education system and compares these to cohorts born in the 1950s and 1970s.

The research reveals marked regional disparities in educational outcomes and that these inequalities have remained stubborn and in some cases worsened over the last three decades.

At the launch of the commission, its Chair, Nick Clegg, called for fresh ideas about how to attract more high-quality teachers into struggling schools.

Learning and Work Institute aims to “inspire people to learn”

NIACE and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion have merged to become the Learning and Work Institute.

This new independent research, development and campaigning organisation aims to promote lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion.

Operating across the learning, skills and employment arenas, the Learning and Work Institute believes everyone should have the support and opportunities to be able to progress at work and in their careers. Its remit covers:

- Research and evaluation
- Delivering projects for providers
- Providing support with local labour market information
- Delivering campaigns
- Informing and influencing policy makers.

Further information is available on the Learning and Work Institute's [website](#).

The Last Word

Paul Steer, Head of Policy, comments on some of the issues featured in this issue.

The Commission on Inequality in Education's report on the gap between the performance of disadvantaged children and their better-off classmates provides a linking theme of social inclusion between many of this month's education stories. The clear evidence that regional inequalities in educational outcomes have persisted for decades is depressing. We should be careful of course not to condemn our schools for this phenomenon when these outcomes are clearly a symptom of much wider social and economic disparities – deep seated problems which the school system cannot put right on its own. Nevertheless, at a time when the Education Select Committee is inquiring into the purpose of education, the role of education in breaking generational cycles of disadvantage is bound to be a major point of discussion. There is plenty to chew on.

The nature of the curriculum and the choices made available to young people both at Key Stage 4 and beyond are not irrelevant in this context. Those signing up to the 'Bacc for the Future' campaign claim that creative subjects are in a spiral of decline as a result of being omitted from the EBacc measure. Not everyone can be a future David Bowie or an Alan Rickman, but it would be interesting to look at what role creative subjects might have played in the past in engaging young people from all backgrounds and building their confidence and wider skills.

The new Progress 8 school performance measure has rightly been welcomed by many and has some potential for recognising those schools that pay most attention to the progress of *all* their pupils, especially those starting their secondary education at a disadvantage. But it is important to remember that all performance measures are far from perfect. Progress 8 has its own flaws, depending so much as it does on the quality and availability of Key Stage 2 data and a correlation between that and GCSE

achievement. We forget at our peril that such measures should never be considered without some contextual information and some alternative measures that tell us other parts of the story. Nevertheless, Progress 8 is a much better measure than the current blunt instrument of '5 good GCSEs' which it will replace and, if intelligently applied, can do something to reward those schools that do most to aid social mobility.

Progress 8 may also help to offset some of the potentially narrowing effects of the compulsory EBacc. It holds the potential to include at least three non-EBacc subjects and this includes a list of approved vocational qualifications, which many teachers will tell you can play an important role in getting the disaffected to re-engage with their studies. Beyond Key Stage 4, the government has seen a need to introduce legislation to make sure people making choices at 16 are given full knowledge of the choices available to them. The new legislation will mean schools will be required by law to collaborate with colleges, university technical colleges and other training providers to ensure that young people are aware of all the routes to higher skills and the workplace, including higher and degree apprenticeships.

We know that vocational routes provide pathways to higher education, to technical and professional occupations and might well be a better alternative to A Levels for many, regardless of their background. If this is the case, then post-16 vocational programmes need to be nurtured with great care and that means the current area reviews of Further Education are critical as well as the financial stability of our colleges. The recent report of the Public Accounts Committee which predicts a 'looming crisis' in Further Education is therefore deeply worrying. It is difficult, however, to reconcile the findings of this committee with the claims of the Skills Minister, Nick Boles, that spending in Further Education is set to

rise in real terms by more than a third in the next five years. Radical change in the FE sector is a given, but let us hope that whatever emerges retains that strong commitment to serving learners from the widest range of backgrounds and age groups.

The AS Level has long been regarded by its supporters as playing an important role in social mobility. It is argued that the AS provides security for students with disrupted lives or economic challenges who are wary of committing at the outset to a two year programme. It means that they can leave after one year with some recognition for the studies undertaken but in reality, it is often good results at AS that give them the confidence to continue their studies to A Level and beyond. The latest news from UCAS that

almost three quarters of schools are intending to offer AS exams in summer 2016, despite being decoupled from the A Level, will therefore be welcomed.

Finally, this month also saw the launch of the Learning and Work Institute, “dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion”. With the heritage of NIACE and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion behind it, it already has a strong track record in making a difference and speaking up for learners of all ages. We wish them every success – there is plenty to be getting on with.