

Expanding role of Institute for Apprenticeships outlined in new Bill

The increased role and responsibilities of the new Institute for Apprenticeships have been set out in a [Technical and Further Education Bill](#).

Launched by the Skills Minister, Robert Halfon, the Bill proposes legislation which builds on the Sainsbury Review and subsequent Skills Plan, outlining the government's plans for FE and technical education.

Extending its remit beyond apprenticeships to cover technical education, the Bill proposes that the Institute will:

- Determine the occupations for apprenticeships and technical education qualifications
- Approve 'standards' and 'technical education qualifications' and groups to develop them
- Own the 'standards' from which qualifications

development will be based

- Hold copyright of approved technical education qualifications.

Building on post-16 area reviews and following a consultation earlier this summer, the Bill also introduces a new insolvency regime aiming to protect learners should a college become insolvent in the future.

In addition, a new measure to require colleges and local authorities to improve the sharing of information such as data on results, is also set out.

The Technical and Further Education Bill was published as the Government confirmed that legislation to introduce the Education Bill, unveiled earlier this year, would not go ahead in this parliamentary session. However, Ministers will press ahead with proposals for reforms to the school system following the current [consultation](#).

EBacc accountability is shaping student experience

Teachers have serious concerns that the EBacc performance measure is dramatically narrowing the curriculum according to a new report.

The [King's College London report](#), commissioned by the National Union of Teachers (NUT), shows the impact of recent government policies on the experiences of pupils and teachers at Key Stage 4.

Key findings from the survey of 1,800 teachers and case studies from a range of schools include:

- 74% of respondents identify that the EBacc has narrowed the Key Stage 4 curriculum offered in their schools with a particular focus away from creative and vocational subjects
- 77% believe the new GCSE curriculum will be less

suitable for low attaining students

- 93% identify that Key Stage 2 SATs results used for Progress 8 measurements, do not provide a reliable basis for tracking pupil progress across the whole range of secondary subjects
- 92% of teachers report that their workload has increased as a result of data collection for Progress 8 with 72% saying that this takes time away from teaching young people.

The government's response to its consultation about how to get at least 90% of pupils to take GCSEs in EBacc subjects, launched a year ago, has not yet been published.

Also in this issue:

> Call for post-16 modular GCSE > Funding pressures on 6th Form Colleges > Multiple exam boards is preferred model
> Report on higher level technical education > FE news > Apprenticeships update > HE Learning Gain project
> Autumn Statement > Ofsted annual report > The Last Word

Increased call for post-16 modular GCSE

The Skills Commission is asking the government to consider whether a post-16 modular GCSE should be introduced for learners retaking English and maths GCSEs.

In its report, *A spotlight on... young people with below average academic attainment and the skills sector*, the Commission highlights the pathways that young people take through GCSEs, the skills and further education system.

It focuses on ways to support these young people, particularly in the light of large numbers of young people failing to achieve benchmark English and maths GCSE grades. In summer 2016, 26.9% of learners aged 17+ re-taking GCSE English achieved at least a C grade compared with 29.5% achieving GCSE maths.

In addition to a post-16 modular GCSE, the Commission makes a number of recommendations including:

- Government and providers should make a concerted effort to boost the recognition, reputation and esteem of Functional Skills qualifications.
- To help promote a diverse curriculum, the DfE should monitor the uptake of Technical Awards and ensure they are properly signposted to learners, parents, employers and education and training providers.
- Additional support needs to be made available to FE providers to fully meet the needs of 16-18 learners. In particular, additional financial and teaching support should be allocated to institutions working with the large numbers of young people re-taking English and maths GCSEs. According to the Association of Colleges, 73 colleges had 1,000 or more students sitting GCSE English or maths re-sits this year.
- The DfE should consider broader performance measures for schools or include an art or tech based subject in the EBacc to ensure breadth in the curriculum and give young people opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities.

Increasingly narrow range of subjects offered to Sixth Form students

Funding pressures are having a detrimental effect on the curriculum in Sixth Form Colleges according to the latest Sixth Form College Association (SFCA) [funding impact survey report](#).

89% of Sixth Form College leaders responded to the annual survey of the cumulative impact of funding cuts, citing a 'triple narrowing' of provision: reduction in the overall number of subjects available to students; reduction in the range of subjects; and reduction in extra-curricular and enrichment activities.

Key outcomes from the survey include:

- Two thirds (66%) of Sixth Form Colleges have dropped courses as a result of funding pressures
- The majority of Sixth Form Colleges have reduced or removed extra-curricular activities including music, drama and sport
- 84% of colleges are teaching students in larger class

sizes

- The vast majority are extremely concerned about the financial health of their college – 31% reported that it was likely that their college would cease to be financially viable in the next 3 years.

The survey report highlights what it sees as the disconnect between the funding made available to educate sixth formers and the actual cost of delivering the curriculum, as well as the lower rate of funding for this phase of education when compared with both pre-16 and higher education. The SFCA calls on the government to conduct a review of funding to ensure it is linked to realistic costs.

This year's survey indicates that academy conversion is proving a popular route for Sixth Form Colleges, with 69% actively exploring this option, potentially in order to address VAT refund issues.

Multiple exam boards is preferred model

The present model of qualifications assessment whereby schools and colleges choose which qualifications their pupils take from a range of providers, is preferable to a franchising model, which in turn is preferable to a single government exam board.

This is the conclusion from a [report](#) from the Centre for the Study of Market Reform of Education (CMRE) which specifically looked at how qualifications should be assessed. According to the report:

- the current regulatory framework does not allow for downward competition on standards, which has historically been the principal case against it

- choice and competition can improve quality in the system
- the current system considerably decreases the risk of system failure unlike the franchising model that concentrates the supply of qualifications and assessment in each subject
- the market's current workings, let alone its potential, do not warrant a radical solution.

The report goes on to compare the different potential models and makes recommendations for improvement in each to get the most value at the lowest cost.

“Tertiary level technical education is in tatters”

Technical education, at Levels 4 and 5, is on the verge of total collapse, according to a new report by Professor Baroness Alison Wolf.

With supporting research from the Education Policy Institute, the report - *Remaking Tertiary Education* - proposes significant reform to education that takes place after Key Stage 5, including conventional and foundation degrees, but also HNDs and HNCs.

Findings from the report include:

- In England, technical post-secondary awards now account for less than 2% of substantial qualifications being taken, and well under 1% of all qualifications funded in the adult skills system.
- Where Level 4 and 5 qualifications are being delivered, they are not in subjects that meet the needs of the UK economy or labour market.
- The push, by consecutive governments, for more university graduates has resulted in an unsustainable higher education funding system that is failing to serve the needs of our economy or of students and which has created an imbalance of funding within tertiary education.

Professor Wolf comments: “There are very serious flaws in our system. These flaws are totally unnecessary, highly expensive, involve major misallocation of resources

and are ruinous to equal opportunity. We have created here systems which are financially ill-conceived and demonstrably ill-suited to our labour market..... We predict that if current policies are maintained, then 5 and 10 years hence, England will be producing even more undergraduate degrees and even fewer intermediate technical qualifications than at present.”

The report calls for a series of reforms, including:

- A single lifetime tertiary education entitlement, available via an any-time loan and used at any approved tertiary institution. The maximum value of this would be based on a three-year full-time degree.
- A redeveloped qualification framework to re-invigorate a high status public equivalent to the ‘Higher National’ qualification. These qualifications should provide a sub-degree tertiary route open to entrants from a wide variety of secondary programmes as well as adult entrants.

In response to the report, the DfE said it had recently reformed technical qualifications to meet the demands of employers: “Our reforms will go further to create a system that’s fairer for everyone by encouraging higher quality, greater competition and ensuring students and taxpayers receive value for money”.

FE news in brief

Students shaping FE

Focusing on the needs of learners in Further Education will be at the heart of a new National Union of Students (NUS) research project.

Led by Sir Vince Cable, the project aims to ensure greater student engagement in current FE policy reforms such as the post-16 skills plan, area reviews and the Technical and Further Education Bill.

The project will involve visits to different FE providers right across the country, speaking to learners about the issues that matter to them most.

Outcomes of the research project will be available in Autumn 2017 with recommendations that will seek to benefit students, their communities and the economy.

Post-16 Area Reviews

Further guidance has been issued on the government’s plans for Area Reviews of the Further Education sector. The guidance includes the [schedule](#) for Wave 5 reviews which begin in November and December 2016, applying for [restructuring funds](#) and the procedure for Sixth Form Colleges wishing to apply for [academy status](#).

Whilst the deadline for written evidence to the Education Select Committee’s inquiry into Area Reviews has

passed, discussions continue with oral evidence to the Committee ahead of the publication of its final report.

FE Reform programme

Robert Halfon MP has written his first [letter](#) on the FE reform programme to colleges and training providers in his role as Skills Minister. The letter signals his priorities for the sector as apprenticeships, social mobility, the skills plan, post-16 maths and English, and transformation of the sector via Area Reviews.

FE Commissioner

Richard Atkins has been confirmed as the new [Further Education Commissioner](#), taking over the role in November 2016. In the Commissioner role, Mr Atkins, the former Principal of Exeter College, will advise ministers and funding agencies on the actions that need to be taken to drive improvement and tackle failing colleges.

157 Group re-launches

A decade after it was founded, the 157 Group has been relaunched as the [Collab Group](#) following a strategic review of how the Group operates. The Group represents 34 colleges and college groups who collaborate, at a local and national level, with a wide range of stakeholders to develop professional and technical skills to transform the UK economy.

Apprenticeships update

Changes to funding

The DfE has announced that it will introduce [measures](#) to reduce the impact of reduced Apprenticeship funding bands.

These include 20% extra to be paid on the funding band limit for 16-18 year olds, and more money to provide additional support for employers to train apprentices in disadvantaged areas.

Higher funding for STEM apprenticeship frameworks has also been announced.

There is still concern that some frameworks will feel funding cuts once the levy comes into place from April 2017.

Better progression needed for apprentices

Too many Level 2 apprenticeships in England do not help teenagers to start a career or progress to higher vocational education, new research suggests.

In its report [Earning and learning: Making the apprenticeship system work for 16–18-year-olds](#), the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) is concerned that apprenticeships are not giving young people the start they need. It proposes a pre-Apprenticeship programme for 16-18 year olds addressing the distinct needs of this age group.

The IPPR proposes that the programme would be offered by FE colleges and would be designed to help young people move on to a Level 3 apprenticeship at the age of 18 or 19.

Apprenticeships should have stronger focus on quality

The apprenticeships programme will not deliver its full potential unless a greater focus is placed on improving

the quality of all apprenticeships, according to a new report.

The Policy Exchange report - [The skills we need, and why we don't have them](#) – is concerned that quality in apprenticeships is being sacrificed as the government has focused too much on numbers and too little on the quality of programmes to date.

The report urges the government to put in place a high level quality target alongside its existing commitment to create 3 million new apprenticeship starts by 2020. It calls for all existing and upcoming apprenticeship standards to be redefined to focus unequivocally on quality.

It also believes that the Institute for Apprenticeships should become the guarantor of quality and the voice of employers, and that the qualifications regulator, Ofqual, should be required to set the standards for how future apprenticeships should be assessed.

Boost for degree apprenticeships

18 Higher Education Institutions have been awarded funding to establish 5,200 new [degree apprenticeships](#) for students starting in September 2017.

The degree apprenticeships will cover a wide range of subjects, from, for example, engineering, through construction, business, nursing and digital, to early years teaching.

Designed by employers, universities and professional bodies, degree apprenticeships deliver high-level skills and offer an alternative to a traditional degree course. Bringing together university study with paid work, degree apprentices spend part of their time at university and part with their employer.

How much do students develop at university?

Approximately 27,000 students from 10 universities will be invited to take part in a new study as part of HEFCE's [Learning Gain](#) project.

This programme of work is contributing to on-going debates and projects about the quality and impact of higher education, and how to evidence students' wider learning. [Learning Gain](#) aims to understand how students' knowledge and skills develop during the course of their degree.

In each year of their studies, participating students will be invited to complete an assessment, which will explore their:

- critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- attitudes towards their study experience
- engagement with their studies.

The project will run from 3 years from the 2016-17 academic year. Participating higher education institutions are: Anglia Ruskin University; Bishop Grosseteste University; the University of Greenwich; the University of Hertfordshire; the University of Hull; the University of Kent; the University of Leicester; the University of Liverpool; the University of St Mark and St John; and the University of Wolverhampton.

Autumn statement sees expansion of selective education

In the government's autumn statement, Chancellor Philip Hammond announced plans for £50 million of new capital funding to support the expansion of existing grammar schools in each year from 2017-18. Further proposals for these reforms in English schools have been added to the consultation document [Schools that Work for Everyone](#).

Some Headteachers and teaching unions have reacted to the autumn statement with disappointment, believing that it failed to address the severe funding pressures in schools and colleges.

Other education highlights from the autumn statement include:

- The adult education budget will be devolved to London from 2019-20.
- The government has published a [review](#) of education and underperformance in the north of England. The report looked to understand problems with the quality of education in the north of England and its causes; and identify effective provision in the north.
- Also published was Sir Nick Weller's independent [review](#) of education in northern England to inform the northern powerhouse schools strategy. The report is an in-depth assessment of the issues affecting education in northern England and recommendations to raise educational attainment.
- The government will be supporting a Royal Society of the Arts pilot to promote cultural education in schools.

Chief Inspector calls for improved technical and vocational education

In his final [annual report](#) as Ofsted Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw says that the quality of technical and vocational education and training needs to improve to meet the skills challenges of the future.

Whilst the proportion of the population with a degree is rising, the annual report tells us that, for pupils not destined for higher education, there are fewer high-quality options available and that skills shortages will not be met by reliance on the country's universities.

"The great barrier to meeting the country's technical knowledge and skills shortages is the poor esteem and status given to technical and vocational education", Sir Michael says, citing the greater parity given by the UK's international competitors.

Other key aspects of the report include:

- Education for children below the age of 11 is stronger than ever

- Education for children above the age of 11 has improved, but not everywhere; secondary schools in the north and midlands are behind the rest of the country
- Pressures on the supply of secondary teachers have not abated
- The proportion of good or outstanding general FE colleges has declined with significant reforms such as Area Reviews, reforms to apprenticeships, the Sainsbury Review and the Post-16 Skills Plan, continuing the 'turmoil' for Further Education.

Sir Michael calls for high education standards all over the country so that England can be more "successful, cohesive and prosperous".

The report is informed by the findings of 25,000 inspections of schools, colleges and providers of early years and further education and skills carried out during 2015/16.

The Last Word

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

This last month has seen a rash of reports looking at regional variations in the performance of schools, including [Ofsted's annual report](#). The broad impression seems to be that the further north you go, the weaker the schools perform. Although this holds some truth, it is a dangerous generalisation – there are plenty of schools in northern regions and localities that are outstanding, and there are more than a few pockets in the south and south east that aren't. The reports tell us, too, that lower performing schools tend to be in areas of economic deprivation – urban or rural. But it is dangerous to generalise here too – because there are also schools with high intakes of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds that are thriving, sometimes against remarkable odds.

What causes schools to underperform is a massive and complex question, although each of the reports offers a range of views on what further might be done – most of them boil down to changing institutional structures or finding ways of recruiting experienced teachers and inspirational school leaders.

The recent NUT-sponsored Kings College report [A Curriculum for All](#) revisits a less fashionable argument – that changing the curriculum might make a difference to school performance. This has its pitfalls – isn't that just changing

the measure? No one would want to advocate a 'dumbed down' curriculum for the less advantaged – we should have exactly the same high aspirations for all children, regardless of their background and where they live. But there is compelling evidence in the report that a diet of EBacc subjects really isn't the way to get the best out of all children. To quote the report: "a major concern for teachers was that the steering of students towards EBacc subjects will increase disengagement and disaffection". At the time of going to press we are still waiting for the final outcome of the government response on the compulsory EBacc – a consultation that was launched over a year ago - so it may be that they are having second thoughts as well.

The [Skills Commission](#) makes similar observations about the impact of the EBacc and also voices concerns about the policy for post-16 re-sits of GCSE maths and English. The argument for a post-16 modular GCSE may not be completely formed but the argument for changing the curriculum in the study of maths and English in *some way* is one that is attracting very large support.

There certainly seems to be plenty of appetite to change the technical curriculum in the Further Education sector. Amongst many other things, the draft [Technical and Further Education Bill](#) provides for a new Institute which will put out to franchise the development and awarding of new qualifications within a fresh framework of broad occupational pathways.

By doing so it can sweep away all existing technical qualifications and training programmes in line with the recommendations of the Sainsbury review of Technical Education which recommends just such a scorched earth approach.

The Sainsbury review goes on to argue for single exam boards because otherwise: "a 'race to the bottom' can develop in which awarding organisations compete to offer less demanding qualifications which are easier to teach and easier to pass, driving down standards and rewarding poor quality". The review is careful to say that this *can* happen, not that it does.

In contrast, a recent report from the [Centre for the Study of Market Reform](#) (CMRE) argues in favour of multiple exam boards stating that it drives efficiency and innovation and that the current regulatory framework prevents downward competition on standards. However, the CMRE report concentrates on GCSEs and A Levels, which are probably the most tightly regulated qualifications on the planet, and the report is largely silent on the matter of vocational qualifications. A recent [Ofqual report](#) also concentrates on comparability between boards for GCSE and A Level and concludes that most of the cases of differences between boards were small - in most cases, less than a fifth of a grade.

Historically, the regulation of standards between vocational exam boards (of which there are over 200) has been much lighter touch than for general qualifications. That isn't to say we should panic. There is no rationale

for claiming that this myriad of vocational boards should offer highly similar qualifications to a highly similar standard – what they need to offer is qualifications that assess whatever needs to be assessed to a standard that is relevant to the occupation or activities in question. They are what they are - and there is little point in making close comparisons between them and other qualifications which measure other things and for different purposes.

But some types of vocational qualifications – including ones which won't be part of the new technical education routes - do need to be directly comparable to each other. A good example is those which feature in the Progress 8 performance measure for schools. The independent research body, Education Datalab, analysed points awarded to the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and coverage of this in *Schools Week* (18 November) stated that "pupils score the equivalent of an A grade in the ECDL, despite achieving an average score below C across their GCSEs. The qualification can be taught in just three days". Thankfully, Ofqual is now investigating this phenomenon.

There are other types of qualifications which are treated as equivalents within performance measures and for other purposes. Applied Generals, which include some BTECs and OCR's Cambridge Technicals, are designed to take people to university. Regardless of board or brand, they attract the same funding, the same UCAS tariff and score equally in college and sixth form performance measures. Students and colleges need to know that whichever board they use, the standard asked of them is the same.

Similar could be said of Functional Skills – a nationally recognised suite of qualifications, widely seen as an applied alternative to GCSE maths and English, but awarded by 15 different exam boards, each with their own, independently designed tests.

Boards involved in offering these types of qualifications are acutely mindful of their responsibilities. They review each others' specifications and sample assessment materials and they do their best to work with shared level descriptors, grading structures and published occupational standards. But these activities aren't highly visible and there are no independent reviews to confirm that they are working sufficiently well. Meanwhile, there are plenty of providers who will tell you they have switched from one board to another because their *perception* is that one board is easier than another. Others will claim they are disadvantaged because a rival college uses a different board.

For these reasons, a strong regulatory intervention is necessary to bring some transparency and independence to the issue; Ofqual has already made it known that it is actively increasing its capacity to regulate vocational qualifications and with DfE reviews of Functional Skills and Applied Generals due for publication early in the New Year, this would give them something to get their teeth into.