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Policy Watch – Six Big Education Policy Challenges for 2012

Introduction

At the start of a new year, Policy Watch identifies six key policy issues that may come to dominate the UK education and training agenda in 2012 and offers a synopsis of each.

The six include:

1. The question of standards
2. The school curriculum
3. Youth unemployment and disengagement
4. Apprenticeships
5. The (adult) skills system
6. HE

In each case a brief summary of the issues, current position, possible next steps and future dates is offered.

1. The question of standards

The Issue(s)

As he indicated prior to taking up office, Michael Gove has made a concentration on education standards (in the widest sense) a hallmark of his tenure as Education Secretary. This has been driven by three factors: continued concern about so-called dumbing down, whether of teaching or exams, and particularly when compared with other so-called high performing education systems; the presence of a significant academic lobby unhappy about the increasingly centralist model adopted by recent Education Secretaries; and general unease, often media driven, about performance in our school system (vide the latest Ofsted Annual Report.)

Current Position

Over the last 18 months, the Government has adopted a number of mechanisms to ratchet up standards. These have included: new powers and leadership for Ofqual; new inspection criteria and leadership for Ofsted; the transformation of a number of intermediary agencies into DfE 'managed' executive agencies; the introduction of new forms of system accountability including raised floor targets, revised league tables and more transparent performance data; structural reform of the school system; changes to the assessment regime of key qualifications such as GCSEs and A levels; and the launch of international benchmarking exercises.

The last few months of 2011, however, saw a number of standards related issues brought to a head. This triggered an intensive period of inquiry and reform that will take us through the 2012 summer exam series. It includes:

- A regulatory report on the summer 2011 exams with a programme of follow-up activity for the 2012 series
- A Select Committee Inquiry into the exam system for 15-19 year olds
- DfE and Ofqual consultation(s) on monetary penalties for identifiable system non-performance
- An extensive (3 years) and wider debate into standards launched by Ofqual in Oct
- Ongoing research and initial benchmarking of international standards at A level
- Suggestions of further, and potentially more extensive reform, by Michael Gove

- A joint OFT/Ofqual review into the operation of the qualification market (announced as part of the Chancellor's Autumn Statement)

What might happen next?

Arguably three things. First and obviously, the exam system will remain under intense scrutiny particularly during the summer. Second, Ofqual will gain new powers and tools. Third, there will be further discussion about the nature and functioning of the exam system with an emphasis on how best to raise performance and secure standards.

Key Dates

- Jan 2012. Completion of new quality checks for Jan series and review of services for summer series (Ofqual)
- Jan 2012. Consultation on new powers for Ofqual and potential changes to the Conditions of Recognition (Ofqual)
- Spring 2012. Select Committee Report on Inquiry into the exam system (Select Committee)
- Mid 2012? Long-term strategy on standards published by Ofqual (subject to resolution of the current issues) (Ofqual)
- Mid 2013? Regulator Report on the health of the qualification market (Ofqual/OFT)
- 2016. Targeted date for completion of A level international benchmarking exercise (Ofqual)

2. The School Curriculum

The Issue(s)

Michael Gove's aspirations for the school curriculum have been evident from the start: a slimmed-down National Curriculum; a clearer focus on essential knowledge requirements at each Key Stage; greater freedom for teachers to develop innovative teaching; greater reliance on external assessment and terminal exams; benchmarking of performance and standards against the best perceived systems in the world.

Much of this agenda has been enacted over the last 18 months starting with a commitment in the May 2010 Coalition Agreement to give schools greater freedom over the curriculum, followed in November 2010 by an extensive programme of measures set out in the Schools White Paper and in January 2011 by the launch of the Review of the National Curriculum. Other measures have included the introduction of the EBacc, the (Wolf) Review of vocational learning, the focus on raising minimum levels of performance in English and maths, announcements about linear GCSEs and Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar, and commissioned reviews on such subjects as music and history.

Current Position

The last few months of 2011 saw four important developments: the passing of the latest Education Act; an Interim Report on progress in the Review of the National Curriculum; revisions to the school league table system; and the latest Ofsted Annual Report on how the school system is performing. It leaves things looking like this:

- The Secretary of State with new powers to intervene in under-performing schools with a presumption that new schools will be Academies (Education Act 2011)
- Ofqual with new duties in ensuring that standards are reliable, comparable and internationally benchmarked (Education Act 2011)
- Schools with teachers granted greater authority over pupil behaviour and discipline but left with a contentious model of securing rather than providing careers advice (Education Act 2011)
- The introduction of a new National and School Curriculum put back a year to allow for further deliberation on such matters as some restructuring of the Key Stages, changes to programmes of study and some re-positioning of subjects (N.C. Review)

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- New criteria and system of equivalencies for future league tables (14-16 Performance Tables)
- Greater attention being paid to the progress of different ability groups (14-16 Performance Tables)
- The EBacc remaining in its current form but new forms of accountability being added (14-16 Performance Tables)
- Continuing concerns about the quality of some teaching and about how best to turn round under-performing schools (Ofsted Annual Report)

What might happen next?

2014 now looks like being the critical year with the new National Curriculum, revised league tables and new linear GCSEs all being applied at that point. 2012 kicks off with some important developments including: the publication of the latest set of league tables; publication of the approved list of qualifications for 2014 league tables; the completion of some important consultations on school funding, 16-19 programmes and UCAS admissions procedures; the introduction of a new inspection regime; and Dept pronouncements on technology. But overall 2012 looks like being a year of consolidation, at least until some of the inquiries into standards have been completed.

Key Dates

3. Jan 2012. School/College league tables published
4. Jan 2012. List of approved qualifications for 2014 league tables published
5. Jan 2012. New inspection regime rolled out
6. Jan 2012. BETT and technology pronouncements
7. Sept 2012. Start of new 2 yr linear GCSE programmes
8. 2014. Application of the new National Curriculum and revised league tables

3. Youth Unemployment and Disengagement

The Issue(s)

The unemployment figure for young people, (16-24 year olds,) topped the 1m mark in autumn 2011 although in truth youth unemployment had started to rise prior to the recession while NEET numbers have remained stubbornly high for some time. However, no Government likes to preside over high levels of unemployment and the 1m benchmark is one that the Government is keen to tackle. That's why there was a flurry of measures in the last few weeks of last year, building on the initial Strategy published by the Government in May. On the plus side, the Government has the advantage of a continuing brief demographic drop in the numbers of young people coupled with continuing high levels of participation in education by 16/17 year olds at least. Yet concerns remain high in three areas. First, the country's long-standing poor record in managing the transition from school to work; second, continuing underlying concerns about the work readiness of many young people; and third, worries that in certain parts of the country, depressed industries and poor school outcomes is creating a toxic set of conditions for many young people.

Current Position

The Government's 16-24 participation strategy, released at the end of last year, brings together much of the activity in this area. Spanning the work of three Depts, DfE, BIS, DWP, it identifies five major objectives: using mechanisms such as the Wolf Review and the focus on English and maths to ensure young people gain the skills needed to get on; implementing a new Youth Contract incorporating sponsored work placements, internships and tailored support; ensuring systems are in place to support the raising of the participation age;

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continuing to fund and support growth in the apprenticeship route; and, providing dedicated supported for those most at need through the Work Programme, Job Centre Plus and family support.

This all leaves things for 2012 and beyond looking like this:

- Starting in spring 2012, an extra 250,000 work experience places being made available under the Youth Contract for 3 years (Youth Contract)
- Also starting in spring 2012, an extra £150m over 3 years being made available to help the most disengaged 16/17 year olds find work or an apprenticeship (Youth Contract)
- A new 2 year £4.5m scheme to support colleges in testing out dedicated work experience schemes for 16-19 year old NEETs (Participation Strategy)
- The development of more structured 16-19 study programmes and funding systems (Wolf Review)
- Incentive payments being available for small employees to take on 16-18 apprentices (Youth Contract)
- Job subsidies adopted to encourage employers to recruit 18-24 year olds (Youth Contract)
- Welfare and skills systems being better integrated for young people (Participation Strategy)
- Financial support available through the Bursaries Fund to encourage 16-19 year olds to stay on (DfE Statement)
- Work with the 3rd sector to provide additional support for 18-24 year olds through the Innovation Fund (Youth Employment Strategy)
- Sector-based Work Academies being provided for unemployed 18-24 year olds (DWP Statement)
- Continuation of funding for first full Level 2/3 qualifications for 18-24 year olds (YPLA Statement)
- Provision of £833m to fund 140,200 new 16-18 apprenticeship starts in 2012/13 (YPLA Statement)
- Targeted funding and support on offer through the new Troubled Families Team (Prime Minister's Statement)
- More UTCs and Studio Schools being developed (DfE Statement)
- Consultation on new regulations to support RPA and supporting RPA LA projects (Participation Strategy)
- Support for the Education and Employers' Task Force programme of employer visits and speaking engagements (Participation Strategy)
- Further rolling out of the National Citizen Service (Prime Minister's Statement)
- Support for entrepreneurship through the NEA, Big Society Capital and Community Development Finance initiatives (Participation Strategy)
- Completing the programme of Myplace youth centres and developing youth innovation zones (Positive for Youth White Paper)

What might happen next?

A lot depends on how the economy performs over the next 12 months. Final figures for 2011 are due at the end of January but the next key dates come in March 2012 when the first quarterly figures for 2012, the next economic forecasts from the OBR and Budget 2012 will all offer our first real insight into how the economy is shaping up this year. An important stage is reached in April 2012 when the Youth Contract really kicks in but for the longer-term, two other aspects appear critical: how quickly growth in the private sector picks up and can stimulate growth and jobs, and secondly, when improvements in the provision for young people, particularly in English and maths, start to feed through.

Key Dates

- Jan 2012. Consultation closes on 16-19 study programmes and funding systems
- Jan 2012. Offer of more work experience places under the Youth Contract
- Spring 2012. Publication of initial data under the new Destination Measure

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- Spring 2012. Publication of initial developments under the Social Mobility Strategy
- Spring 2012. Publication of key employment stats
- April 2012. Launch of National Careers Service
- 2013. Participation Age raised to 17

4. Apprenticeships

The Issue(s)

The Government has spent much of its first 18 months prioritising apprenticeships. This has been done partly to ameliorate the impact of growing unemployment and partly as a way of trying to boost growth in the economy (research suggests that for every £1 of public investment in an apprenticeship up to £40 is generated for the wider economy.) It has led to a record 442,700 people starting an apprenticeship in the 12 months Sept 2010 to Sept 2011 and with new targets being regularly announced, such levels of growth seem likely to remain.

However, rapid growth has been accompanied by rising concerns about the nature and quality of some apprenticeship programmes with particular questions being asked about whether apprenticeship funding was being used as a substitute for employer training programmes and whether rapid-fire six week programmes really constituted genuine apprenticeship provision. As these and other concerns grew, the Government spent the last few weeks of 2011 announcing a series of corrective measures and inquiries designed to ensure the credibility of the apprenticeship system remained intact.

Current Position

The last 18 months has seen a rash of announcements on apprenticeships including: new targets for 16-18 and adult numbers as part of the 2010 Skills investment Strategy; the announcement by the Prime Minister in June 2011 of a new Higher Apprenticeship Fund; the piloting from August 2011 of an outcome payment pilot for large-scale employers; and a new incentive payment scheme to encourage small firms to take on an apprentice announced in November 2011. All the while apprenticeship funding has been 'protected' by the Treasury even while cuts have been announced for other programmes. The 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review apportioned a further £250m over the Spending Review period to apprenticeships while Budget 2011 added a further £180m. As it stands, the total budget for apprenticeship provision for 2012/13 amounts to £1.4bn while current developments look like this:

- SMEs to be offered up to £1,500 for each 16-18 apprentice they take on (Youth Contract)
- Programme lengths to be considered under the current reviews with an expectation that 16-18 programmes will have a duration of 12 months. The NAS will assess the implications for other age programmes (Hayes announcement)
- Apprenticeship providers to provide opportunities for apprentices to work to Level 2 GCSE or Functional Skills in English and maths (Hayes announcement)
- Health and safety compliance to be simplified (Hayes announcement)
- Apprenticeship vacancies to be advertised within one month (Autumn Financial Statement)
- First round of bids for new Higher Apprenticeship funding completed (BIS Statement)
- Remit for Select Committee Inquiry into apprenticeships confirmed (BIS Select Committee)
- Employer-led review into apprenticeship standards and quality announced (BIS Statement)
- £833m set aside for 16-18 apprenticeship provision in 2012/13 (YPLA Funding Statement)
- £698m set aside for adult apprenticeship provision in 2012/13 (Skills Investment Statement)

What might happen next?

With so much at stake, it's likely that prioritisation on apprenticeships will continue but arguably now within a more inquisitive climate. Three further questions stand out about funding: will the promised reductions in red tape really be enough to fund continued

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apprenticeship growth: will employers really pitch in and offer sufficient places; will the introduction in 2013 of a fee loan model for higher-level provision dampen growth? Apart from funding, two further issues seem likely to be prominent in 2012. The first is quality and standards where John Hayes has already made a number of announcements but the issue of 'policing' remains. Ofsted, Ofqual, the NAS and AOs all have a role in this but it remains messy and NAS may come under scrutiny as a result. And the second is that of provision for 16-18 year olds where growth remains the lowest for any of the age groups. How far employers will want to pick up apprenticeship and training programmes for all 16-24 year olds as the UKCES have recently proposed will no doubt be debated as the wider Employer Ownership programme starts to pilot later in 2012.

Key Dates

- Jan 2012. Consultation closes on 16-19 study programmes
- Jan 2012. Simpler health and safety requirements in place
- Jan/Feb 2012. Employer-led review of apprenticeship standards and quality
- Jan/Feb 2012. BIS Select Committee inquiry into apprenticeships
- Jan/Feb 2012. 2nd round of bids to Higher Apprenticeship Fund
- Aug 2012. All new apprenticeship contracts to include provision for L2 Eng/math
- 2012/13. 20,000 new 16-18 apprentices to be supported under the SME incentive scheme

5. The (adult) Skills System

The Issue(s)

The (adult) skills system has been routinely criticised over the years for being too bureaucratic, too complex and failing to provide employers, let alone the country, with what's needed. Numerous surveys over the years have attested to the fact that employers remain only partially engaged and yet as the latest such survey, that by the UK Commission in Dec 2011 shows, total employer spend on training (including replacement and other admin costs) over the last year amounted to £49bn.

As it currently exists the skills system is the product of numerous Government interventions and Reports, the most notable recently being the 2006 Treasury commissioned Leitch Report. This Report established a number of principles for the UK skills system including: shifting public funding from supply to demand; granting employers greater leverage over skill development; integrating where possible employment and skills infrastructure. It also set the model for the development of the skills system for the rest of the decade. New stimulants followed in the form of Train to Gain, National Skills Academies, the Skills Pledge and the UK Commission but the system appeared cumbersome in the face of the latest economic challenges. So partly for pragmatic reasons and partly for efficiency reasons, the present Government has undertaken a number of reforms. In summary, it has tried to pare back the system, create greater headroom for employers and shift the funding burden, initially at a higher-level, on to those who benefit most, while at the same time setting developments within a new growth and innovation strategy. The dismantling of the Future Jobs Fund, RDAs and Train to Gain in favour of the Youth Contract, LEPs and Employer Ownership is evidence of the new direction the skills system is now taking.

Current Position

Further flatlining of the economy and worries about future global competition have ensured that the Government has remained pretty active in this area over the last year. Current developments have included: developing a model of Employer Ownership and kitemarking for aspects of the skills system; developing a new sub-regional structure using key cities (led by mayors,) as hubs, LEPs as partnership arrangements and the Regional Growth Fund as a funding channel; encouraging enterprise through Enterprise Zones, Enterprise Allowances and enterprise activity in the education system; strengthening the transition to work through a

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reformed VQ system, focusing more on essential English and maths levels and more targeted work experience schemes; freeing up sector growth in areas like construction, manufacturing and the green economy; setting in place a network of technology and innovation catapult centres; and introducing a fee loan system for the acquisition of high level skills in return for better support, guidance and employment information for those investing in it. This is how things currently look for 2012.

- Overall public investment for FE and skills for 2012/13 set at £3.8bn (Skills Investment Strategy 2011)
- A new streamlined funding system and standard rates matrix to be introduced in 2013 (SFA announcement)
- Introduction of a new L3+ fee loan model in 2013 (New Challenges, New Chances)
- Commitment to test out a new funding and Employer Ownership Pilot (BIS Statement)
- Introduction of employer kitemarking scheme initially for STEM subjects (Autumn Financial Statement)
- Development of a new loan scheme and Business Coaching for Growth package to support SMEs (BIS Statement)
- Piloting of a new 'distance travelled' funding model for basic skills (BIS Statement)
- Expansion of Regional Growth Scheme and Enterprise Zone scheme (Autumn Financial Statement)
- Development of the concept of a High Vocational Education Progression programme linked into HE loans and CAT scheme (Building a World Class Skills System)
- Employer and Select Committee Reviews into Apprenticeships (BIS Statements)
- Development of a community trust learning model (Building a World Class Skills system)
- Launch of an independent commission on adult education and vocational pedagogy (op cit)
- Consultation on NOS and review of employer role in QD (op cit)
- Creation of standard information sets and access to comparison-based course data for prospective learners and employers (op cit)
- Development of a global 'skills' strategy (op cit)
- Showcase of UK skills and talent as part of the 'Make It in Great Britain' campaign (Prime Minister's Statement)

What might happen next?

With growth forecast at 0.1% lower than that at the end of 2011 and unemployment forecast to rise well into the 3rd quarter of the year, the skills system will continue to operate under a difficult set of conditions. The Government remains keen to continue its transformation of the system but the process of making it more responsive to the market is being taken cautiously to avoid too much destabilisation. Changes to the funding system have thus been put off for a year, changes to the provider side left as evolving and new mechanisms such as Employer Ownership and basic skill incentive funding only trialled. On the positive side, hopes are being pinned on two areas: continued growth in apprenticeships and the showcasing of UK talent as part of the Diamond Jubilee and Olympic so-called 'GREAT' campaign.

Key Dates

- Jan 2012. Launch of prospectus for the Employer Ownership pilot
- Spring 2012. Launch of community trust prospectus
- Spring 2012. Launch of independent commission on adult education and vocational pedagogy
- Spring 2012. Launch of common information sets and employer kitemarking for vocational provision
- Spring 2012. Completion of series of Apprenticeship Inquiries
- Spring 2012. Launch of proposals for the Green Investment Bank
- April 2012. Launch of the National Careers Service

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6. HE

The Issue(s)

Arguably no aspect of Government education policy has attracted as much comment and criticism as that of higher education. The 2010 Browne Review, subsequent Commons debate and follow-up White Paper completed a marketisation of the HE sector that had begun under Lord Dearing and been extended under Tony Blair through the introduction of top-up fees. Henceforth private investment largely in the form of fee loans rather than public subsidy would increasingly drive HE although the Government claims that at £10bn, its investment in HE in 2014/15 will be higher than it was in 2010/11. The effect of this shift in the way in which HE is to be funded has led to a series of developments, most of which were identified in the June 2011 White Paper, and intended variously to liberalise the sector and open up the market while at the same time secure regulation and quality and grant prospective students greater rights and information as 'paying customers.'

Current Position

One of the major complaints last year was that reforms to the HE sector were happening piecemeal leaving universities having to make critical decisions about fees and numbers for instance, on the basis of partial information. Much of the reason for this was that the publication of the promised White Paper was delayed meaning that the period between the crucial vote on the Browne fee proposals at the end of 2010 and the publication of the White Paper in June 2011 was spent waiting for the detail that the Government had promised. This meant that critical consultations such as those on a new regulatory framework, early repayment and mechanisms for undergraduate number controls as well as consequential adjustments to fees, numbers and programmes had to be completed as the new vision was taking shape. In late autumn 2011, the Select Committee called for a slower introduction of many of the changes but the Government is now committed to its current timescale and will introduce enabling legislation in May 2012. The current picture, therefore, looks something like this:

- The picture becoming clearer on the impact of fee and other changes on undergraduate recruitment for 2012 entry as UCAS release key data in January and thereafter
- Consultation closing on the UCAS admissions process review proposals
- Consultation on a new method for funding teaching from 2013/14
- Review and revision of student number control mechanisms for 2012/13
- Development of a new single regulatory framework
- Development of a new HEFCE based functionality to licence and monitor new forms of provider
- Continued expansion of HE in FE
- Report on progress under the (Ian Diamond) Efficiency and Modernisation Taskforce activity
- Further work on streamlining QA processes
- Consultation on a more proportionate model of quality assessment
- Development of Key Information Sets for prospective undergraduates
- Further development of a system of student charters and evaluation surveys
- Publication of the Wilson HE-Business Review and HEFCE review of knowledge exchange activity

What might happen next?

The Government is looking for 2012 to bring 'a smooth transition' to the new HE arrangements many of which will be enshrined in the forthcoming HE Bill. For the present, three issues stand out. First, the impact of the new fee regime on future recruitment in particular on the risk averse, those who come under widening participation and foreign students. After some criticism, the Government has stepped up its communication on fees and is now supported by an independent taskforce but a big issue here, at least for the first two of these categories, is

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just how effective Access Agreements prove to be. Last year, 23 institutions failed to meet widening participation targets and while OFFA, who oversee the process, has new powers, the redistribution of fee income will be watched closely. Second, the management of student number controls. The Government is on record as wanting to lift the lid and operate a more open market in due course but for the moment HEFCE will be required to operate some control over numbers. A number of principles were established for the autumn bidding, many of which came from FE colleges, for the 20,000 margin places; potentially this re-allocation of places will affect who offers what in future and there are fears that some institutions might suffer. Third, the extent to which the new regulatory model built around an extended HEFCE can ensure quality and standards particularly as new providers come in and competition builds up. Questions about HEFCE's powers such as whether it will be able to exact compensation, what registration requirements will be required of new providers and how far will it be able to enforce quality standards as the nature and market for higher education changes, will hopefully become clearer once the HE Bill is published.

Key Dates

- Jan 15 2012. Key deadline for 2012 university entry
- Jan 2012. Consultation closes on the UCAS Admissions Process Review
- Jan/Feb 2012. Results of bids for 20,000 margin places announced
- Spring 2012. Publication of HEFCE review of knowledge exchange activity
- May 2012. Likely publication of HE Bill
- June 30 2012. Final deadline in 2012 admissions process before Clearing
- July 2012. Outcome of consultation on 2013/14 funding
- Sept 2012. Implementation of Key Information Sets
- Sept 2012. Further roll out of the National Scholarship Programme
- Sept 2012. Introduction of QAA's new quality assurance model for HE in FE

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