

GMT interview

Policy, skills and education in 2015

with Steve Besley

It is December 2014. GMT's Aphrodite Papadatou catches up with Steve Besley¹. Head of UK Education Policy at Pearson, Steve is a well-known figure in the education and skills sector, and a fountain of knowledge in all things skills policy. In this exclusive interview, Steve considers the state of education and skills in the build up to the general election. He discusses further education (FE), higher education (HE), information, advice and guidance (IAG), funding, employer engagement, party politics and much more. There is no better person to round up 2014 with his unique blend of knowledge, foresight, and humour which have for years made his reviews so accessible. 2015 has arrived!

It has been a while since GMT last caught up with you in Summer 2011² but what an exciting time to meet again! Tell us what you have been up to in 2014? What things keep you ticking and excite you and what do you most enjoy about your work in education policy?

As ever it's been another hugely busy year in education with a lot happening around curriculum and qualification reform, developments around the skills agenda and continuing debate about the future funding and nature of HE so there's no shortage of things going on. All of these things, and many more, matter enormously to individuals so the challenge remains not only keeping up to speed with developments but also about what sort of reactions they are generating. In fact I'd say the biggest change having 'worked' in education policy for so long has been the advent of social media. It's opened up a whole new world of comment, opinion, thought and yes sometimes comments you'd never have thought of or even wanted to but it's all an important reflection of views and you need to keep up with it...there's always a gem in there somewhere.

Skills and education in an international context: Pearson stands in the forefront of this. But what is its importance in terms of the UK's economic growth and the wellbeing of learners?

The interesting thing is that skills policy has risen up the political agenda to become one of the biggest challenges

we face. Last month, for instance, we had nine major reports, four keynote speeches, three set piece conferences and any amount of column space all on the issue of skills in some form: skills for the present, skills for the future, global skill challenges, skill levels generally, skills funding and so on. The reason for this burst of interest is of course that skills, or more precisely the talent pipeline, is critical to economic recovery and with employers continuing to express concerns about the talent pool in their sector, government has taken a deep interest, so much so that there is talk of a vocational 'arms race' breaking out. It's raised all sorts of questions about the nature of training, the role of employers and the changing nature of the jobs market but for us in the UK, two issues remain. One is strengthening the school to work transfer for young people and the other is securing the route through higher education.

2015 is a big year for British politics with the general election in May. Based on the manifestoes and discussions held in last autumn's party conferences, how high up on the agenda of party politics are education and skills? I remember clearly in 2010, all themes HE related were particularly 'hot' but where are we now, what do different parties have to offer?

With the general election just five months away and no one political party a clear favourite, this is an 'interesting' time for policy in general let alone education. Education doesn't feature very high as an electoral issue at present; in the latest reports on voter interest, it comes in around the third or fourth issue behind the economy, NHS and immigration. Nor has there been any sense of significant gear change in education policy as there was ahead of both the 1997 and 2010 elections. The 'hot issues' remain pretty much the same including school standards, 14-19 education, college responsiveness and HE tuition fee funding. There's broad agreement on many of the issues across all the major parties but some marked differences about approach within that. This can be seen for example over issues such as school academies, college specialisms and higher education funding. We reach the end of the year with both major parties pretty much neck and neck in all three major poll

¹ Steve Besley is Head of UK Education Policy at Pearson Education Ltd.

² Download the pdf of the GMT interview with Steve Besley at: www.hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/Steve_Besley_Summer_2011.pdf

ratings but with enthusiasm for the traditional two-party system seemingly waning. It's going to be an interesting few months.

In what ways have recent budget cuts impacted education, in your opinion?

The most obvious answer is higher education where of course the issue of tuition fees and what impact these would have on student numbers and thereby institutions has remained a constant theme throughout the last four years. However, the latest health check on the system by HEFCE and the recent report on 2014 admissions by UCAS³ suggest that the sector is bearing up well... although the issue won't go away. School funding, at least for ages 5-16, is ring fenced and many schools too have been buttressed by the pupil premium so the real 'victim' in all this and the one that often gets little attention is FE and in particular budgets for 18 year olds and for adult skills. Lots of figures have been thrown around about the level of cuts and without getting into specifics, this remains a real concern for the future particularly in the light of the Chancellor's latest Autumn Statement which indicated a further three to four years of further cuts for departments such as the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS)⁴.

Arguably, IAG provision for young people has been in crisis since the demise of Connexions. More recently, Education Secretary Nicky Morgan announced £20 million of funding for a new 'careers and enterprise company'⁵, which aims to broker employers in the mix and supplement the work of the National Careers Service. How sincere is this move? A political manoeuvre or something more meaningful? In other words, do we see a change in direction and priorities – more funding for IAG?

I think the answer is that we don't know yet. The new company, which of course is more of an advisory or brokerage company than a supplier of services, doesn't get going until next spring and on the basis that this is just before the election, it could be seen as a political manoeuvre but hopefully not. The important thing is that after months of suggesting that all was well and that schools and colleges were doing what they had to, even in the face of conflicting reports, the issue about careers guidance has at last been recognised. At present it's hard to see any more money being conjured up to support IAG but the issue for the future may be more about how to modernise a system that on the one hand needs to be able to offer a personal service, while at the same time offer a hi-tech model of fast moving employment and training opportunities. I'm not sure we're quite

there yet in terms of how we do all this.

Vocational skills, work-based learning and apprenticeships – all three are pretty high on every party's agenda. Is FE the future of employability, and is the FE sector equipped enough to deliver?

Last month, the Association of Colleges published a response to a UKCES report commenting on how closely and with how many employers, colleges typically worked with⁶. Both they and training providers work closely with employers in lots of different ways but the political perception remains that they are still not aligned sufficiently with local labour market needs. This is why the Labour Party is talking about creating employer accredited Institutes of Technical Education and the Conservatives are pushing the case for National Colleges. The specialised college or training provider model is not new, remember Centres of Vocational Excellence, and is likely to run as a theme well into 2015 but the new challenge is localism: the devolvement of key public services, such as skills training, to local bodies and partnerships. The blueprint for this is the recent Greater Manchester Agreement. It potentially shifts the skills system around a locally determined model of provision which in fairness the FE sector has been pretty good at responding to.

How can employers' best work in partnership with colleges and universities in delivering employability?

Many employers sit on college and university boards and committees in various capacities but there is a sense that a stronger relationship needs to be created at regional or sub-regional level and that this will be an area of development after the 2015 election. This already happens in some areas with local Chambers of Commerce, Local Enterprise Partnerships and other forms of local partnership but can be patchy and if the government, either now or in the future, wants to shift to a more regionally devolved model, then a nationally recognised structure of local business-education boards may need to be put in place.

Spearheaded by BIS, there has recently been a flurry of reports and ensuing debate about the value of different levels of qualifications in terms of earnings potential. In your opinion are there reliable sources of information about the value of qualifications – both vocational and non – available to students and careers practitioners?

There's considerable interest at present in moving beyond performance table listing of qualifications to

³ UCAS Undergraduate 2014 End of Cycle report is available to download at: www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/2014-ucas-end-of-cycle-report.pdf

⁴ HM Treasury (2014) Autumn Statement 2014 available to download at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/382327/44695_Accessible.pdf

⁵ Read the press release about the Careers and Enterprise Company at: www.gov.uk/government/news/new-careers-and-enterprise-company-for-schools

⁶ Association of Colleges (2014) response to UKCES Growth through People report. Available at: www.aoc.co.uk/news/aoc-responds-ukces-growth-through-people-report

actually trying to assess both the potential and the actual value of qualifications to the individual in terms of job opportunities and wage returns. BIS has been consulting on ways of doing this throughout much of the year and is gradually building up an impressive database of market intelligence intended to support this in the future. It's not an easy area but, rather like food labelling which allows the consumer to make an informed judgement, so employment and wage return data has the potential to do the same for learners.

School leaver schemes: Employers are more interested in hiring school leavers. Nonetheless, alternatives to HE are still taboo themes in school careers advice, as recent research shows (AGCAS/GTI – on parental influence in students' career choice decision making)⁷. What is your opinion on the future of these alternatives?

School leavers are always going to take advice on careers from a range of sources and parents and family members will be one of those. What is interesting is

how attitudes are shifting whether because of social networking or because of headlines about the economy, but young people are increasingly recognising labour market signals much more than perhaps we give them credit for. We saw this in the summer for instance when it became clear in the reporting of exam results that young people were increasingly choosing subjects that could help secure them jobs in the future. So for me, this is very much an attitudinal thing, which may take some time but is starting to happen. Nobody talked much about apprenticeships that long ago but now everybody is talking about the opportunities they can bring: that's the sort of attitudinal change that's taking place now.

Finally Steve, what are you looking forward to in 2015 in the world of skills and education?

The Education Secretary recently said that, "*education is a partnership; it isn't a battle or a war*". In an election year, it seemed a pretty good wish for the future.

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⁷ AGCAS/GTI (2014) Parental influence on children's academic and employment choices. Available at: www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/750-Parental-influence-on-children-s-academic-and-employment-choices-