

Speech: Amanda Spielman's speech at the Sixth Form Colleges Association

Thank you Bill. It is a pleasure to be here and to be speaking to you all today. This is my first speech since the election last week, and it's certainly been a remarkable week. And I should start by congratulating Justine Greening for her reappointment as Education Secretary and, of course, welcoming the new Minister for apprenticeships and skills, Anne Milton, about whom I have heard very good things.

But, I am still standing here, 6 months into my tenure as Chief Inspector. And what a busy and rewarding 6 months it has been. I am constantly amazed by the boundless energy and commitment shown by everyone I meet across all the sectors we work with. Given that our education system reflects the quality of the people who work in it, this is very reassuring. We are indeed lucky to have the most talented generation of college and school leaders in our history.

But let's not pretend that everything is perfect. Times are challenging. I am acutely aware of the changes you have faced as a sector over the last few years, and the challenges that you are facing now.

Funding is probably the greatest – and I'll talk about that later – but, more generally, our post-16 landscape is changing and is looking very different to the one we had 5 years ago. Many colleges are merging, and I know that many sixth form colleges have, or are considering, becoming academies.

So I want to start by reassuring you that Ofsted does understand these challenges, and the uncertainty that they can bring. We certainly don't want to make it harder for you to navigate an increasingly complex and shifting policy landscape. Because it is vital, through all of this change, that we do not lose sight of the reason we are all here: to improve education for young people.

Of course, one other significant change is uppermost, as we near the end of exam season. The new A-levels. During my time at Ofqual, I was deeply involved in designing and seeing through the new linear A-levels. This may make a few of you want to throw things at me; but, I have heard more and more good things as I have talked to A-level teachers over the past 2 years.

So I am proud of the new A-levels, but at the same time, I know how much work there will have been for all of you, both in the planning and in the teaching of the new courses – as well as the exams themselves. This is the first year in so many subjects, and the first year is the hardest for everyone! This must have been a stonker of a year for you, so thank you.

I also know that when curricula and exams change, there is uncertainty. So I offer you this reassurance: in a year of change, we know that results are less predictable, and will be making sure that all our inspectors know that

too. We have already been doing that with inspectors for GCSE and if we haven't done that yet for A levels we will be soon. In truth, I think we should be getting away from the idea that accurate predictions of exam grades are an essential component of good management. Time spent on making and re-making predictions is time not spent on teaching.

Demanding the best

The good news is that sixth form colleges face these 2 challenges, funding and curriculum, from a position of strength. You have been for years, in many ways, the jewel in the crown of the post-16 sector. Of all the forms of post-16 education, your colleges provide a particularly high level of quality. And this good work extends beyond results, to your wider success in preparing sixth formers for the next stage.

The best of you are characterised by strong leadership and governance, effective teaching, a supportive learning environment, and by real academic success. It is pleasing to see high qualification achievement rates across most sixth form colleges. And progression rates to higher education, including for disadvantaged students, are also very good.

But again, I cannot pretend that the sixth form college family is without problems. There has been a decline in inspection outcomes during this academic year, with a number of colleges dropping to 'requires improvement'. During this year, I think we have inspected 23 colleges and 10 of those colleges were risk-assessed as requiring a full inspection. Of these 10, 7 declined from 'good' or 'outstanding' to 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate', with inspectors finding that students weren't making the progress they were capable of.

While for now, this is about a small number of inspections, no one can afford to be complacent. It is vital that leaders and managers in these colleges understand what lies behind these performance dips, and take the right action. On a more positive note, of the 8 short inspections completed this year, it is encouraging that 6 colleges remained 'good' and 2 improved to 'outstanding' – my warm congratulations to Birkenhead and St John Rigby Sixth Form Colleges.

The curriculum

These 2 colleges remind us how it can be done. They show that they understand the very point I made earlier: as a sector we must not lose sight of why we are here. Beyond everything else, what matters is the quality and real substance of the education young people receive.

That is why, earlier this year, we began a review of curriculum, in all of our education remits. Because, important as exam results are, we must not allow curriculums to be driven just by GCSEs and A levels or by what students believe will help them get the highest grades. It is the substance of education that ultimately creates and changes life chances, not grade stickers from exams. What you study matters, not just the grade points. So I

am determined to make sure that the curriculum gets the proper attention it deserves.

In our survey, part of what we are looking to understand is whether the curriculum has real meat, and isn't just sliding into narrowed exam question training. I have asked our inspectors to go in as observers – this is about gathering evidence, not making judgements – in colleges and schools around the country. What they have found already is raising a lot of interesting questions.

Of course one of the important dimensions of the curriculum is study programmes. We have already learnt a lot about the impact of these programmes on colleges. Last year, we made 30 visits to outstanding providers, including 10 sixth form colleges. This evidence is also informing our study.

And although we will start publishing findings from September, this will be a long-term project. It is also not a project we are doing in isolation. We have drawn together a group of experts from a range of backgrounds to advise on the research. We are drawing on research from others: for example we have been chewing over the recent Education Datalab findings about the reduction in the number of A-levels being taken by the typical student.

I know that the curriculum is an issue close to your association's heart, with the range of workshops you are already running on the issue, as well as your 2015 survey 'Costing the sixth form curriculum'. So clearly, you have a great deal of expertise to share, and I'm delighted that you are supporting our work. It has been striking how many other stakeholders are also pleased that we are doing this work.

And one final curriculum-related point – as I have said before, whether the GCSE resits. Policy has the right intent, but it is perfectly reasonable to ask whether it is having the desired effect. And while I appreciate it doesn't impact on SFCA members as much as other parts of the FE family, this is still important to resolve.

Funding

Now, before you all start asking me difficult questions, let me be absolutely clear. Of course, I realise that the curriculum is linked to funding. There is always going to be a tipping point, at which the funding of colleges affects the curriculum they can offer.

It is striking, and concerning, to see the feedback in the most recent SFCA survey of members. I am sure I don't need to remind you of the highlights: two thirds of you have dropped courses due to funding concerns. More than a third reported having to drop a modern foreign language course. Nearly two thirds have removed or reduced enrichment activities. This is not comfortable reading.

Taken in isolation these figures could be depressing, but I take comfort knowing that sixth form colleges are remarkably efficient in using resources to maximise curriculum time. Inspection findings show that the best providers

of study programmes are those with the largest numbers of A-level students, regardless of whether the provider is a school sixth form, general FE, or sixth form college.

However, it is post-16 education that has borne the greatest weight of education cuts in recent years, with schools remaining relatively, and I stress relatively, protected. While there have been some recent moves to level the playing field, it is clear, as recently highlighted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, that colleges remain the poor relation in the wider education sector.

It is telling that such high proportion of you are actively considering the move to academy status. I think it is safe to assume that many of you are motivated by the VAT handicaps that disadvantages you relative to your school sixth-form contemporaries. But I am interested if there are other factors as well.

And it is absolutely right for you to be thinking about how best to deliver a sustainable future for your colleges. Ultimately, your survival, and with it the continued provision of quality education for so many young people, is at stake. I absolutely recognise that all this change has created much extra work. But a word of caution. Please don't let this distract you from the first priority: of ensuring that the young people you serve get the best possible education.

For my part I promise you this. We have always been proud of our ability and willingness to speak truth to power, and that will not change in my tenure. Let me repeat the message I have given your colleagues in schools and in the wider FE and Skills community. You can be sure that where we find standards are suffering, as a result of inadequate funding, we will not hold back from delivering that message.

Part of what we do is reporting on individual institutions and part of what we do is aggregating that information. And more generally we will never be afraid to say what needs to be said.

I am determined that Ofsted is regarded as a force for improvement. We will highlight outstanding practice and recognise where leadership and management are performing well. But, equally, where we see the need for improvement, we will say so.

This is as true at a system level as for individual colleges. With the wealth of evidence we hold, we are exceptionally well placed to see the bigger picture of what is happening across all the different areas we inspect. We can spot the trends; see emerging issues before they take hold and raise flags when needed.

I am determined that we use this privileged position for the benefit of everyone with a role in the education of our children.

So coming back to the national landscape, the future has seldom looked less certain. There are undoubtedly challenges ahead for all of us in this

changing landscape. I do have every confidence that the sixth form college family is ready to meet them.

Thank you.