

In brief

Woman takes top job

Stockport College has appointed the first woman principal in its 120-year history. Lynn Merriton, currently deputy principal curriculum and quality, played a key role in transforming the college into an outstanding institution that has been awarded beacon status. She starts as principal next month, replacing Peter Roberts, who has been appointed chief executive of the newly merged Leeds City College.

Swine flu alert

A member of staff at Sutton Coldfield College has the first confirmed case of swine flu in further education. The woman, based at the Josiah Mason campus in Birmingham, was diagnosed last week. Students with whom she had been in contact were notified.

In line with advice from the Health Protection Agency, the college has not closed. The agency said the West Midlands has been the area hardest hit by the illness, with 1,095 confirmed cases.

Standards reviewed

A review of the occupational standards expected of trainers and assessors is underway, raising the University and College Union's fears that it may lead to a blurring of roles of largely work-based staff and further education lecturers.

The sector skills body Lifelong Learning UK is reviewing the national occupational standards for learning and development. An online survey of sector views runs until the middle of next month.

Geraldine Craven, the review manager, said that aim was to ensure standards were accurately applied, not to blur roles.
● www.lifelong.org

Congratulations

Richard Bolsin, general secretary of the Workers' Educational Association, the UK's largest voluntary provider of adult education, and Ivor Moon, who has been a member of the association for 70 years, were both appointed Members of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the Queen's birthday honours list.

Valerie Whiting, international co-ordinator at Oaklands College in Hertfordshire, was also made an MBE in recognition of her 45 years' service to the college.

Hear the big debate

Those who missed the Learning and Skills Network's recent Big Debate on the planned machinery of government changes and what they mean for 14-19 education can listen to an audiocast of the event.
● www.lineducation.org.uk



The Sixth Form Colleges' Forum plans to start piloting a baccalaureate scheme in September that aims to widen teenagers' knowledge and skills.

Sixth form colleges to bac a rounder education

Extra activities broaden students' experiences and help make them more appealing to universities

By Alan Thomson

SIXTH FORM colleges are developing a baccalaureate designed to differentiate the educational experience they offer from that provided by schools and general further education colleges.

Despite its name, the Sixth Form Bac would not be a qualification in its own right but effectively a quality mark for the type of high-achieving and rounded education that sixth form colleges market.

The SFBac would require students to take courses and activities in addition to traditional exams, such as A-levels. These could range from study skills to community involvement and citizenship activities, which might include work experience, playing sport or being involved in drama productions.

While the bac is designed to appeal to students and parents, one of its main target markets is higher education, where admissions staff have reported difficulties in differentiating between straight-A applicants.

It is timed to take advantage of the new legal status to be conferred on sixth form colleges if the Apprenticeships, Children, Skills and Learning Bill receives royal assent

as expected in the autumn. In law, sixth form colleges are currently part of the further education sector, but the bill proposes a sixth form category separate from both FE colleges and schools.

The SFBac – to be summarised in the slogan “subjects, skills, values, breadth” – will be launched at the Sixth Form Colleges' Forum (SFCF) conference next week. A pilot of the award is due to begin in September, involving up to 10 colleges.

David Adelman, principal of Godalming College in Surrey and joint author of the proposals, said the SFBac would act as a counterweight to the test-based approach of mainstream qualifications.

“In a way, the SFBac will offer a kind of grassroots answer to the question: ‘What counts as an educated 19-year-old in this day and age?’” he said. “It will be a quality mark to say that our students have not just done the subject-based qualifications but also the activities that give them a much broader learning experience.”

Mr Adelman said the forum and London University's Institute of Education, which is supporting the pilot, would be seeking the views of universities.

Meanwhile, a major report, also to be launched at the conference, details the funding gap between schools and sixth form colleges. The SFCF paper places the argument for improved funding in the context of the pending machinery of government changes. The changes mean that responsibility for commissioning and funding 16-18 education, which comprises 95 per cent of sixth form college funding, shifts from the Learning and Skills Council to local authorities from April next year.

“Sixth form colleges will be more closely aligned to school sixth form arrangements and to the funding streams currently going into schools,” the paper says. “A major focus for the forum,

It will be a quality mark to say that our students have not just done the subject-based qualifications

David Adelman, Godalming College

therefore, will be to articulate and expose the real extent of the funding gap which exists between schools and sixth form colleges, and work towards reducing and eventually removing that gap.”

The paper accepts that the funding gap in 2008-09 identified by consultants KPMG was 5.6 per cent. This includes the 3 per cent difference in the national funding rate for schools and sixth form colleges, which means that in 2008-09 schools were given £2,945 for each student while colleges received £2,860.

However, the SFCF argues that the funding gap between sixth form colleges and schools could be as high as 20 per cent, meaning some colleges are £1.5 million worse off than schools doing the same work.

This figure builds on the work done by KPMG for the LSC. The consultants conceded that, taking into account quantifiable factors such as the teachers' pay grant received by schools but not colleges, the gap is closer to 10 per cent. The forum argues that the gap rises to 20 per cent if other unquantified factors, such as the interest repayments made by colleges on capital building loans, are taken into account.