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Policy Eye

Highlights of week ending Friday 20 December 2019



(Welcome to Policy Eye, a weekly service from Policy Watch offering a regular round up of UK education headlines and stories from over the previous 7 days.)

The week summed up.

Life picked up again this week after the general election.

For education that's meant three things. First, thinking about the new political reality in which education now operates. Second, considering what the priorities might, or perhaps should, be for the incoming government. And third getting back to 'normal' business, the sort announced in the latest [Queen's Speech](#).

Let's start with the first of these: the new political climate. With the same Ministerial team filing back to their desks, at least for the moment, it may not seem like much of a new climate. Nor has the agenda changed a lot. Funding as ever remains the big issue and each sector will be watching keenly to see when funding promises are met. Away from funding, there's the familiar 3As of school accountability, the apprenticeship levy, and the Augar recommendations, all needing attention.

Yet things may change for three reasons. First, as many commentators have noted, the Conservatives have swept up a new core vote in northern towns, making it as [Rob Halfon suggested](#) 'the Workers Party,' likely for example to be more interested in priorities such as skills training. Second the new intake of MPs is more diverse than ever before, more females, more from ethnic backgrounds and more, as the [Sutton Trust](#) revealed, from a comprehensive school background. And third, the machinery of government may change, probably post January 31 with new departments likely to include one leading on business, energy, trade, industrial strategy including skills; the Bedsit dept as [the FT](#) dubbed it.

Next what have education 'experts' been saying about future priorities? For HE, Nick Hillman [suggested](#) that funding for teaching might be tough but that for research better. Also that the government might act swiftly in two areas: low-value courses and campus free speech. For FE, AoC's David Hughes [reckoned](#) that a lot will depend on funding but future skills training, Institutes of Technology and a coherent post-18 strategy should all be up there. And for schools, the TES [highlighted](#) a number of possible things to look out for including a further push on system reform notably with more free schools, teacher workload, the 2Rs of recruitment and retention, and providing for the 'forgotten third' of low achievers.

Finally then, back to business and what the [Queen's Speech](#) had to say about future priorities. For education there was little that was new: levelling up school funding, consultation to enable Ofsted to inspect outstanding schools, support for skills provision and local growth, value for money in post-18 provision and sustainable HE funding. It's what happens next that counts.



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Top headlines this week

- 'Teachers tell pupils 'Oxbridge not for the likes of you'.' ([Monday](#))
- 'Conditional unconditional offers on the rise.' ([Tuesday](#))
- 'Teaching is number one career choice for young people.' ([Wednesday](#))
- 'Universities warned over student sales pitches.' ([Thursday](#))
- 'What the Queen's Speech says about FE.' ([Friday](#))

People/organisations in the news this week

General Policy

- [Back at their desks](#). The TES along with other educational press, reported that there had been no changes to the Ministerial team at the DfE following the election
- [The government's programme](#). The government outlined its intended legislative programme in the traditional Queen's Speech including pre-announced measures on levelling up school funding, consulting on inspecting outstanding schools, investing in FE estate and skills provision, and 'considering' Augar
- [Priorities for government](#). The Reform think tank listed targeted school funding, teacher retention and contextualized admissions in universities as its three top education priorities for the incoming government
- [What school did you go to?](#) The Sutton Trust provided its regular analysis of the education background of the new House of Commons showing that of the newly elected MPs, 62% were educated at comprehensives, a slight increase on previous figures
- [Economic Forecast](#). The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) published its latest economic forecast, updated from March and held over until after the election, showing that following the September spending round and changes to the accounting treatment of student loans, the government may have less to play with than anticipated
- [Nursing grants](#). The government announced that all nursing students on courses from September 2020 will benefit from a new annual grant worth up to £5,000 with additional payments for regions and students most in need
- [English language tests](#). The government announced that Pearson had been awarded a contract to provide Secure English Language Tests (SELTs) for people needing to demonstrate their language skills to live or work in the UK

HE

- [World class but](#). The Office for Students (OfS) launched its first Annual Review looking back on its work and the sector in general over the past year, highlighting a number of positives but pinpointing three significant issues (admissions and recruitment, information for prospective students, and the quality of teaching and learning) as a focus for the year ahead



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- [University entry 2019](#). UCAS published more reports in its End of Cycle series on this year's applications to higher education, indicating an increase in the number of applicants receiving a conditional unconditional offer but a drop in the number accepting them
- [Widening participation 2017/18](#). The government published the latest set of figures on widening participation in this case for the 2017/18 cohort showing a slight increase in the number of free school pupils entering HE by age 19 but a growing gap between them and their non-free school peers
- [A view from HE](#). Nick Hillman, director of the HE Policy Institute (HEPI) assessed the impact of the election result for higher education outlining five forward features including a likely blitz on courses seen as low value, a potential squeeze on funding for teaching but more hopeful prospects for research
- [A view from the frontline](#). A University staff member outlined their thoughts on the future for HE in the aftermath of the election in an anonymous blog on the HEPI website indicating a number of difficult home truths and concluding that universities need to think about how best to serve a new blue collar client group

FE/Skills

- [A view from FE](#). David Hughes, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, outlined some thoughts on the effects of the election on FE and in particular the additional funding and likely shift in balance towards FE that may now accrue
- [Looking back in pride](#). The Education and Training Foundation published its Annual Report for 2018/19 pointing to an increase in membership, training activity and commercial income including a first DfE contract
- [English and maths support](#). The Mayor of London announced a 10% increase in the Adult Education Budget for next year to help those with low levels of English and maths and to support those with special needs

Schools

- [Inspection perceptions so far](#). Sean Harford, National Director for Education at Ofsted, blogged about some of the initial trends emerging from inspections under the framework, noting that while there's been a slight dip in the proportion of schools getting top grades, other outcomes have remained constant
- [Minimum funding levels](#). The government issued its response to the earlier consultation on implementing minimum per pupil funding levels which becomes mandatory for local authorities under the National Funding Formula, noting concerns about the impact on small schools and on the provision of other services which it will continue to monitor
- [Local breakdown](#). The government set out for Local Authorities how much money they would be getting next year including the additional money promised to level up school funding
- [School funding](#). The Reform think tank highlighted discrepancies in school funding in a new set of priorities for government arguing that targeted rather than levelled up funding was likely to be more effective in the long-run
- [Tackling maths anxiety](#). Dr Thomas Hunt from the University of Derby talked about his work with schools and parents on tackling maths anxiety in light of the Pearson Power of Maths Roundtable earlier this year



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Tweets(s) of the week.

- “Delighted and proud to be reappointed as Universities Minister to represent the best and fairest HE system in the world. Our fantastic universities across the UK are part of the solution not the problem to ensuring everyone, regardless of background, fulfils their potential” -@CSkidmoreUK
- “A Year 11 boy stopped me on the stairs after school today. Presented me with a mars bar. Awkward lad, pupil premium, never talks in class, looks undernourished, dishevelled. Mumbled some thank you but I can't recall for what as I was fighting a lump in my throat” - @MrBlachford
- “Amazing how many students' laptops 'act up' towards the end of semester” -@gregfoley2002

Other stories of the week

- What would you do if you were Education Secretary for a day? According to the inestimable Teacher Tapp which taps into the innermost thoughts of teachers, scrapping SATs would be the first thing, although in fairness that's mainly of course among primary teachers. The next two most popular choices, and interesting in light of the recent election, would be to return academies to local council control and remove the charitable status of fee-paying schools. Details [here](#)
- What's the plan this Christmas? According to the latest 'Night Index' from Deltic, about half of us think that a big night out is a good way to mark the festive season and celebrate the end of the year, although unsurprisingly this is mainly among the younger age group. Apparently 33.5% of us go out to get into the festive spirit while 13.5% of us go out to avoid relatives. And the average spend for a night out? £69.64. Full details on this link [here](#)

Quote(s) of the week

- “Just imagine where this country could be in 10 years' time” – the Prime Minister introduces the government's programme of activity as laid out in the Queen's Speech
- “Skills, standards, social justice and support for the profession should be the 4Ss mantra of our education policy” – Rob Halfon MP on what should be the 4 pillars of Conservative education policy
- “The first few months of the new year will therefore be a critical time for influencing the new immigration system” – the CBI prioritises immigration reforms among its priorities for the new year
- “Some say austerity is over but that's evidently not true for university teaching income” – the director of the HE Policy Institute assesses the impact of the election result on HE
- “We must admit that, for outsiders, the current system is opaque and inefficient” – an anonymous blogger reflects on the current universities admissions system
- “It's early days, but so far feedback on our new inspections has generally been positive” – National Director for Education at Ofsted, Sean Harford, considers some of the early evidence coming through from schools on the new inspection framework

Number(s) of the week

- 54%. How many MPs in the new House of Commons were educated in comprehensive schools, up 2% on the number at the last election according to analysis from the Sutton Trust



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- 30. The number of Bills in the latest Queen's Speech
- 0.9. The percentage point gap in university progression between free school and non-free school meal students, according to latest data from the government
- 2.4%. The fall in the number of 24 and above aged students enrolled in US college courses, according to latest figures from the National Students Clearing House Research Center
- £40. How much the Institute for Apprenticeships has now started charging per apprentice for external quality assurance (EQA) where it is the provider, according to the Institute's latest notice
- 77%. The proportion of schools so far rated good or outstanding for overall effectiveness under the new inspection framework compared to 80% the year before, according to a new blog from Ofsted
- £2.4bn. How much we spend in this country on Christmas outfits that we wear less than three times, according to a report in The Independent

What to look out for next week

- Santa