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Pocket Watch – Key education themes for 2015

Introduction

The start of a new year has brought the traditional flurry of predictions for what lies ahead in the coming months. Financial pundits have been lining up to predict more borrowing and higher taxes at least for the second half of the year, techies are predicting a growth in 'anticipatory computing' (smartphones that anticipate what information you need,) while political pundits are predicting a very close run thing when it comes to the election but what of education, what's in store here for 2015?

Here are some key themes that we're likely to hear a lot about in 2015.

1. *An education 'lite' general election.* That's not to say there won't be numerous announcements, we've already had three this week with David Cameron pledging more, as yet undefined, education legislation, Ed Miliband promising to grow the apprenticeship route and Nick Clegg reasserting Lib-Dem plans to protect education budgets but there's little sense of any new vision or direction driving education as there was in say 1997 or 2010. That may be no bad thing given the intensity of reform programmes over the last few years and indeed there's a strong argument, as a recent YouGov poll indicated, for giving managers in schools or colleges, time and space to respond to change. As it is, there are still plenty of current issues around to arouse passions with school brands, workloads, youth training and tuition fees all being obvious examples but if the intent behind last summer's Ministerial changes was to allow for a softer approach to these and other education issues as the election approached, then it seems to have had the desired effect with education now seemingly in calmer waters.
2. *Debate will grow about how best to manage change in the future.* As government divests itself of a range of responsibilities and a shift towards local management takes hold, an interesting debate is developing about how best to manage big reform programmes in the future. The model of prescribing from the centre is, as Michael Gove declared when launching the national curriculum review a few years ago, unlikely to be replicated in the same way in the future particularly as the education system becomes more fragmented. All three major Party Education Spokespeople have recognised this as an issue and are likely to call for changes depending on who's in power after the general election. Interestingly both Nicky Morgan and David Laws made speeches on the matter on the same day at the end of November with the latter making a strong pitch for an Independent Standards Authority "*charged with assessing changes in standards and performance over time and overseeing the detailed development of curricula.*" The concept of an independent, professionally-based Commission, able to advise the Secretary of State on the curriculum is not new, operates in other countries and may well come under consideration here.
3. *Funding issues will never be very far away.* The economy was always going to feature prominently this year and so it's proving with furious debate raging currently about the costing of various spending plans. While the Parties bandy about figures on anything from the costs of ensuring all teachers in schools and colleges are fully qualified to the funding needed for an increase in apprenticeship numbers, the more immediate issue is the potential impact of cuts for 2015 and beyond, particularly since the harsh dose of reality dished out by the Chancellor in his Autumn statement. At the moment only two things are clear. First that all major Parties are committed to reducing the deficit over the lifetime of the next Parliament albeit some more painfully than others and second that we shan't know the precise nature of any cuts until at least the second half of this year when a new Spending Review is completed. For the moment, ring fencing, further efficiencies and the future of the pupil premium remain issues for schools; the funding of apprenticeships, the spread of fee loans and the impact of Dept cuts remain issues for FE while for HE, student funding will continue to be debated but its long-term future looks likely to be dependent on who's holding the reins after the election as to whether there's a further review or not.

4. *Social mobility and opportunity will continue to set the context for much of education.* According to the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission who issued their second annual 'state of play' report last October, "*Britain is on the brink of becoming a permanently divided nation.*" The current government has justified many of its education and welfare reforms on the basis they would help improve social mobility but as the Commission's conclusion indicates and reports from Ofsted to the Prince's Trust have underlined, this is proving challenging. Just what role education should play in this, whether for instance there should be more grammar schools, or more young people should be equipped with employability skills or more disadvantaged young people encouraged to enter HE, remains open to question. Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt raised the stakes in a keynote speech last November when he committed a future Labour government to ending state subsidies for private schools if they did not support new partnerships with state schools but other proposals can be seen in the Commission's own 12 key recommendations.

5. *Accountability and inspections systems will continue to evolve* in response to access to greater data and demands for greater transparency. A lot of work has been done in this area by the current government and at present there seems to be broad political consensus about some of the accountability measures proposed. There's still some modelling and harvesting of data to be done but the aim is to have new floor and progress measures in place for schools in limited form this year and fully from 2016 and new adult learning success measures in place the year after. Where we are likely to see debate this year is around the use of baseline assessments at the start of Reception, the nature of destination data for school leavers and the relationship to wage returns for college leavers. As for school/college inspections Ofsted is currently mulling over responses to its recent "*radical*" plans for streamlining inspection arrangements. How far this will satisfy all Parties remains to be seen. Tristram Hunt has already indicated that further reform would follow if Labour gets in while as Sir Tim Brighouse indicated in an interview late last year, there's still a strong body of support for a more self-determining system. Either way, more change seems likely although the bigger story may well be taking place in HE where the case for putting quality assessment services out to tender is under review.

6. *Qualification reform will soldier on.* The first of the revised GCSE, AS and A levels will be taught for the first time this September and represent accordingly a further stage in the sweeping programme of curriculum reform which began some three years ago, has taken in considerable change on the way but which has a further two years of implementation to go. It's been a demanding process; issues like GCSE grading and practical assessments in science continue to be debated but the reform tanker is well under way now and would be difficult to turn round at this late stage. Where we might see developments this year is in three areas. First in providing a better balance to the curriculum with a push to develop pupil character alongside traditional subjects. All Parties are committed to this and developments are following at a steady pace. Second, in the long-running saga of the standalone AS level where the election will determine whether Labour will get its chance to reverse government policy even though as Ofqual has warned it may take time. And third, the GCSE, 30 years old now but where, as the CBI's John Cridland suggested in his New Year message, the issue of whether we still need an exam at age 16 remains live and may well re-emerge if Labour wins and starts to implement its proposed 14-19 Bacc model.

7. *There'll be more system change.* This always tends to happen after a general election and a number of changes that could transcend Party lines for whoever is in power after May, are already lined up. These include: a College of Teaching, teacher professional development, school commissioners, careers portfolios, youth training and apprenticeships, specialist colleges, local commissioning of skills training, city region partnerships, online learning, high-level voc provision, fee loans, alternative providers, quality assurance systems.



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