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Pocket Watch – 10 education themes from this year's Conferences

Introduction

This week the last of the major Party Annual Conferences drew to a close. Eight months away from what remains an open General Election, each of the Parties has been anxious to lay out its respective stall, so as the security barriers come down and the wagons roll out of town, what have we learnt about where education stands when it comes to the election? Here's ten things.

Ten things we've learned about education from this year's Conference season

1. *It's all about the economy.* The economy and its relative performance remains the big story and lots of numbers were bandied about at Conference events. Both Ed Balls and George Osborne talked about the need *'to balance the books'* so perhaps the number to hang on to for the moment is £25bn, the figure set by the Conservatives at least for 'savings/cuts' in the first two years of any next Government. Vince Cable seemed less taken with the £25bn figure and it obviously raises lots of concerns for education: will school funding remain ring-fenced, will there be further raids on FE funding; and how to pay for increased numbers in HE. The Chancellor indicated the savings would come from reducing Whitehall spending, restraining public sector pay and benefit freezes while Ed Balls was clear that *"in our manifesto there will be no proposals for any new spending paid for by additional borrowing."* All three Parties have now pledged to slash the deficit, the main difference being the length of time needed to achieve this; David Cameron and Vince Cable opted for three years, Ed Balls *'over the lifetime of this Parliament.'* For those who want the gory details on future spending plans, the **Institute of Fiscal Studies** and the **Office for Budget Responsibility** have produced useful reports.
2. *Everyone loves apprenticeships.* Apprenticeships remain hugely important in terms of skills supply, social opportunity and employer engagement and each Party had announcements to make about them. The Lib-Dems called for an increase in the minimum wage for the lowest paid apprentices, provisionally £1.06 an hour for 30,000+ apprentices. Ed Miliband listed apprenticeship growth as the 4th of Labour's six great goals for the future, pledging to match by 2025, the number of school leavers who go to university with that joining an apprenticeship scheme. At roughly 300,000 this is doable although further funding changes and/or the Party's adoption of a L3 model would make things more difficult. Ed Miliband also re-iterated previous pledges that companies recruiting workers from abroad should offer apprenticeships to young people and equally companies seeking government contracts should be prepared to include apprenticeship opportunities in the package. As for the Conservatives, they pledged to provide funding for a further 3m apprentices, at a faster rate than Labour being over the lifespan of just the next Parliament, and paid for from savings to welfare provision.
3. *Praise be for teachers.* Nick Clegg called them *"wonderful"* and *"noble,"* Nicky Morgan went *'heroic,'* everybody it seemed gushed with praise for teachers. In her speech, Nicky Morgan outlined two priorities when it came to teachers: reduce their overall burden and ensure they spend more time teaching. Such things can be difficult to effect but she did promise to launch what she called *'a Programme of Talks.'* Labour continued its push for a fully qualified profession so that there was *"a world-class teacher in every classroom."* It was left to Francis Maude to raise the issue of teacher strikes by calling for a change to the rules on strike ballots to prevent future strikes
4. *Lots of bold promises to abolish youth unemployment.* No Party wants to head towards an election with large numbers of young people out of work and although the official figures have been falling, there are still concerns about how strong the bridge to work for many young people actually is. Both Conservatives and Labour made bold Conference promises *'to abolish youth unemployment.'* For Labour this would be through a package comprising a Compulsory Jobs Guarantee, a Basic Skills Test for those on benefits and a Youth

Allowance, paid for in part by a tax on bank bonuses. For the Conservatives, it would be an 'earn or learn' model, with Jobseeker's Allowance abolished and replaced by a time-serving Youth Allowance after which the recipient would have to move on to an apprenticeship, traineeship or community work, costed at around £85m and paid for out of the same package of savings being used to fund apprenticeship numbers.

5. *Something's not right with careers guidance.* There've been lots of reports over the last year, 20 or more according to the National Careers Council, about the woeful state of careers guidance but perhaps the message is getting through. Nicky Morgan acknowledged in her speech that "*it's been too long overlooked in schools,*" while Tristram Hunt pledged to ensure that what he called "*proper careers guidance*" was embedded in schools under the new 14-19 arrangements. Both interestingly coupled it with a re-introduction of work experience while the Prime Minister additionally promised a place on the National Citizenship Service for every teenager in the country.
6. *Germany still hits the spot when it comes to vocational education.* Labour has been talking for some time about further reform of vocational learning particularly for young people and as Tristram Hunt explained in his speech, the objective "*is a vocational education system to rival Germany's.*" How realistic this is remains to be seen but some components such as a much closer working relationship with employers and the creation of a national technical qualification have already been set out in the Party's Taskforce Report on 14-19 education published earlier this year and were referred to by both Ed Balls and Tristram Hunt.
7. *Still a big divide over school types.* The future for Free Schools continues to divide the Parties. Nicky Morgan took time in her speech to announce the approval of 35 new free schools. Labour remains unhappy about free schools and Ed Balls confirmed in his speech that they wouldn't pay for one in any area where there was an excess of places. The Party remains keen on more collaborative arrangements for schools working with local Directors of Standards. "*Schools should work together,*" Tristram Hunt argued, promising to roll out the London Challenge model which had brought schools and authorities together under the last Labour Government to raise standards in London.
8. *FE holds the key to skills supply.* The most surprising revelation that emerged about this sector during the Conference season was that the Government had at one time wanted to scrap it, or so Vince Cable claimed in a fringe meeting. All Parties currently at least see the FE sector as critical for supplying the skills throughput to employers but the question of responsiveness still hangs over it. Hence why Labour re-iterated its belief in Institutes of Technical Education and the Conservatives in National Colleges, both in effect specialist providers dedicated to particular employer needs. The other issue that surfaced during a fringe meeting at least at the Conservative Conference was literacy and numeracy where the current Skills Minister appeared more relaxed about GCSE alternatives.
9. *Tuition fees remain the hot topic in HE.* Labour's Liam Byrne spent some talking about his new vision of a higher technical route through university but as ever the issue of fee levels was never far away. Nick Clegg apologised for past sins, Labour continues to wrestle with the problem and may not be able to come up with a definitive statement until later this year at the earliest. All recognised that postgrad study was in a bad place and needed more support and that further work was needed on widening participation. Labour, it seems, also remains keen on putting regulation on a legislative footing through an HE Bill.
10. *No change yet on foreign students' status.* In a word, the battle goes on. Both Liam Byrne and Vince Cable made the now familiar argument for removing foreign students from official immigration figures but there it continues to rest at least for the moment.



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Lessons from Conference season Oct 2014