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Pocket Watch – 5 education ‘bites’ from each Party Conference

Introduction

The annual Conference jamboree has ended for another year and the respective Parties have headed off to Westminster to pick up the cudgels there. Attention is now firmly focused on the future and in particular the 2015 election rather than the past and the post 2010 election conditions. If anything, this shift from looking back to looking forward was the key message that came out of this year’s Conferences. But what about education, what’s the story there?

Key announcements from the Lib Dems

1. Meals. Universal free meals, to come in from 2014 and to apply to all children in reception, Yrs 1 and 2 at a cost of £600m a year. Lib Dems also announced that this would be extended to ‘disadvantaged’ students in Sixth Form and FE colleges. The latter follows some extensive lobbying to equalise conditions for those who stay on in college as opposed to school but does not include training providers
2. Schools and 14-19. A raft of measures adopted intended to improve 14-19 learning. These include a better balanced 14-19 system with independent careers advice, work experience for 14-16 yr olds, pre-apprenticeships and provision up to 18 for English/maths/ICT
3. 16-24 and skills. Support for the current system review of 16-24 provision and for a range of other measures listed in a Conference Paper on Lifelong Learning. These to include maintenance loans for 18-24 yr olds on L3 STEM courses as well as for employed 18-24 yr olds undertaking p/t study, mandatory skills training as part of the Universal Credit system, an increase in apprenticeships and better advice and guidance
4. Higher education. A number of measures proposed including a National Bursary Scheme for disadvantaged students, allowing international students to remain in the UK for up to three years providing they are in graduate level employment and incorporating current agencies into a single HE Council structure. But on the ‘nuclear’ issue of fees, any review to be put off until after the next election
5. Key sound bite. *“The absolute worst thing to do would be to give the keys to Number 10 to a single party government, Labour or the Conservatives”*

Key announcements from Labour

1. Primary Childcare Guarantee. Described as ‘a One Nation’ solution to every day family concerns, this would include breakfast clubs and after school care in every primary school although no costing included. Separately, but included in the Shadow Minister’s speech was support for work experience tasters in primary school
2. Schools and 14-19. Continuing commitment to “a gold standard Tech Bacc,” a strong emphasis on accredited work experience placements, a pledge to reverse the current changes to the AS level and a “rebooting” of independent careers guidance in schools. Not much more on school systems following Stephen Twigg’s speech on the matter in June but support for local authorities being able to issue early warning notices to academies as they do for schools
3. Apprenticeships and skills. A promise from the Shadow Business Secretary to implement many of the recommendations from the independent Skills Taskforce in particular improving vocational learning in FE and adopting a L3 benchmark for apprenticeships. Other apprenticeship proposals discussed included: making them a formal part of procurement practices, whether there should be a UCAS style application process for apprenticeships, and where large firms recruit a migrant worker from outside the EU, an obligation to take on an apprenticeship in return. One other skills proposal to note was for Jaguar Land Rover’s Mike Wright to lead a review of manufacturing supply chains in the UK
4. Higher education. Little to add, policy position still to be confirmed but reform still on the cards in some shape although unlikely to include a graduate tax or the £6000 pledge
5. Key sound bite. *“Britain can do better than this”*

Key announcements from the Conservatives

1. Children. Brief references in the Education Secretary's speech to the extension of free school meals to infants, the growing numbers of children being taken out of care and the changes being made to special needs support. And an aspiration from the Prime Minister to "eliminate" illiteracy though no target date set
2. Schools and 14-19. Announcement about changes to early entry at GCSE made on the eve of the Conference. No further announcements made in a speech by the Education Secretary that focused instead on the importance of providing opportunities for all children, the 'nobility' of the teaching profession at a time when some were calling for strike action, the significance of the current exam reforms and the blessings of having a 'dynamic' team able to see such changes through
3. Welfare and skills. Clear message in the PM's speech for under 25s to be earning or learning or to lose benefits and for the dual option choice for school leavers of either university or an apprenticeship. Support from the Chancellor for small businesses including a cut in National Insurance from next April to encourage more job opportunities and the provision of a 'Help to Work' programme of community work placements and intensive job search for those who reach the end of the two-year Work Programme still unemployed. In addition a big expansion of the National Citizenship Service to come next year
4. Higher education. A big focus on science and STEM activity with fee loans to be extended to p/t students of engineering, technology and computer science who already have a degree in a separate discipline and, from 2015/16, a new £200m match fund to support new teaching facilities in science and engineering, particularly targeted at those able to encourage more women into such study
5. Key sound bite. *"A land of opportunity .. for hard working people"*



Steve Besley
Head of Policy (UK and International)
Pearson Think Tank

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Conference season messages Oct 2013