

2014/4

15 Jan 2014

Pocket Watch – Top Ten Education Themes for 2014/15

Introduction

This is the last full year before the next general election and while education may not feature as a big theme this time round (currently it's looking like being the fourth E behind the Economy, Europe and Energy prices,) it will no doubt be hotly debated in some quarters. This year has already seen three issues vying for attention: qualified teacher status, skills training especially for young people and HE funding, so what are likely to be the big education themes as the year progresses and the election looms? Here's a top ten listing based on current developments.

Top ten education issues

1. **Funding.** Almost inevitably funding remains a hot topic especially for a Dept like BIS which is facing difficult decisions on both HE and FE funding. The economy may be picking up but the Chancellor has been quick to scotch any thoughts that the hard work is done and the funding taps can be turned on by announcing a further £60bn of spending cuts for over the next four years. For education, Michael Gove has pledged to protect school budgets but the ring-fencing principle remains under scrutiny, the NAO and Education Committee have questioned the costs of the Free School programme, 16-19 funding rates have been cut from 2014/15 and the Dept is continuing to divest responsibilities where appropriate. BIS appears to face even greater pressures with concerns about how to fund the proposed growth in student numbers, fears about an increase in loan non-repayments and talk of cuts having to be imposed in other areas. All of which may put a further squeeze on FE where adult skills funding was cut at the last Budget, 24+ loans have been introduced and plans to transfer apprenticeship funding to employers announced. Issues such as what should be protected and what sacrificed, employer investment realities, efficiency gains, class sizes, online delivery, outsourcing let alone pay and pensions are all likely to feature in what the Chancellor has described as "*a year of hard truths*"
2. **The school system.** What might happen to an increasingly devolved school system after 2015 has already provoked considerable interest as the comments at the start of the year from Lord Harris, a leading Academy sponsor, have indicated. The Shadow Education Secretary has begun to refresh his predecessor's ideas on parent-led Academies, Michael Gove has moved to set up "*a long term-architecture*" through Regional Commissioners and School Boards, the Education Committee is undertaking a further inquiry into the role of Academies and Free Schools and David Blunkett is completing his review for the Opposition of structures at a local level. The nature of the school system is building up to be a significant political issue with deep divisions between the Parties about how a devolved system should operate and how far it can generate self-improvement
3. **Assessment.** This is emerging as the defining issue of a world-class qualification system where the challenge remains how best to balance validity and reliability with simplicity, cost and new technology. Current issues include assessing without levels in primary, grading scales for new GCSEs and quality assurance of practical learning at L3. Both Government and Ofqual have put assessment quality at the heart of the current qualification reform programme where there's been a significant push to incorporate external endorsement, international referencing and what can best be described as more established forms of assessment in the shape of more terminal exams and less modular assessment. Much of this will become apparent as the new qualifications start to be accredited from this autumn but debate about future assessment techniques remains
4. **Accountability.** Accountability systems have begun to look very different following a series of consultations in 2013 covering primary, secondary and post-16 education. The traditional format of profiling institutional qualification scores focused on a narrow performance band is shifting towards one which can produce a rich source of data covering a whole range of institutional and individual performance set within local, national and

international contexts. Greater transparency has its downsides (a lot depends on how the data is used for example) as well as its upsides but most seem to agree that many of the current proposals, particularly at secondary level, offer a positive step forward. Modelling continues this year, ready for application for 2016 performance

5. **Qualified teachers.** This has been on a slow burn ever since the Government abandoned the GTC and gave the green light for non-qualified teachers to operate in Academies and Free Schools. It has now been taken up vigorously by Labour who has called for lecturers teaching English and maths in FE to have the appropriate qualifications and, just this week, for *"all teachers in state schools to have qualified teacher status or be working towards it."* At issue here is the question of how best to improve teaching and learning standards and whether a licence to practice scheme which not all support or a Royal College which both Parties at least tacitly support, would help. Professional bodies and teachers will be watching with interest
6. **English and maths.** Not a new issue but one that was further exposed at primary, secondary and adult level in a series of national and international Reports in the second half of last year. Not only of course are these essential disciplines for learning but as such Reports highlighted, failure to achieve in them can create barriers to employment, lack of social mobility and disengagement from society. All Parties are committed to raising the bar in performance at least to age 18 and a number of mechanisms have been proposed to support this from teacher bursaries to maths hubs to funding incentives but debate continues about what else would help and the issue remains on the top of intrays
7. **Social inequality.** A big challenge for education which commentators from Sir John Major to Alan Milburn and bodies from Ofsted to the Prince's Trust have all recently indicated holds the key. It's a challenge in fairness that all Parties and education providers take seriously and while recent initiatives such as the extension of free school meals, increase in the pupil premium and the widening participation strategy in HE may obviously help, the sense remains that an unconnected series of initiatives is no substitute for the sort of national approach that the Social Mobility Commission has called for. Much of the current focus is on young people, their employability skills and their transition to employment
8. **FE.** The FE system appears to be bracing itself for another bout of system reform. The Government has started to apply its new intervention regime through the FE Commissioner, hand much of the training system over to employers and streamline the qualification system around responsive provision. Labour is emerging from its reviews of FE keen to see a modern Tech College model, focused on core skills and intermediate and technician training endorsed by employers with providers held to account through a licensing system. Potentially a battle for the soul of FE is under way
9. **HE.** The Government's recent decision to lift the cap on numbers in HE has provoked furious debate about future university funding, quality procedures and regulation, and the nature of the HE market generally. John Denham's recent speech apart, all Parties are looking to keep their powder dry on fees in the build up to the election but funding, and where to protect and where to squeeze, looks like being the dominant issue at present
10. **Learning technology.** The jury is still out about the pace of change and implications for learning here. MOOCs continue to attract and detract in equal measure for HE, Voc MOOCs or at least an increase in online learning may well emerge in FE following last year's FELTAG Report and announcement on capital funding, and blended learning, as the Shadow Education Minister indicated recently, continues to be explored for potential in schools. It continues to be a slow avalanche.



Steve Besley

Head of Policy (UK and International)

Pearson Think Tank

Pocket Watches are intended to provide quick, informal updates on national developments. Information is correct at the time of writing and is offered in good faith. No liability is accepted for decisions made on the basis of information given.

Ten election themes Jan 2014