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Conservative conference could be a launch pad for new education policy

Written by Harriet Jones, Senior Political Consultant on 19 September 2017



Having had a ‘bumper year’ during the last parliamentary session, education and skills policy is set to be lower key during the following six months, in terms of legislation at least. The Queen’s Speech contained a complete lack of proposed legislation relating to education, skills and in fact children. Despite there being no bills to crawl their way through parliament, the Department for Education, along with other relevant Whitehall buildings, will still have plenty to get its teeth into over the coming months.

For example, debate on the new fairer funding formula, the subject of which having been one of the more prevalent topics prospective MPs were met with on doorsteps during the run up to the election, is still rumbling on. Justine Greening’s patching together of £1.3bn for schools funding was met with hesitant warmth from parts of the sector, but concerns from particular localities are still prominent. The Conservative manifesto commitment that no school would have its funding cut was reiterated by Greening in a statement to parliament on 14 September where she gave further detail about the National Funding Formula (NFF) and confirmed it would be brought in in April 2018. The Department is likely to be troubled by lobbying from the teaching unions and other bodies on school funding, and the “crisis” in teacher recruitment and retention for the foreseeable future.

Having been less prominent on the front pages over the last couple of years, tuition fees are once again set to have a substantial effect on broader Westminster politics. Calls for a fairer system of higher education funding, particularly in the context of the widely-publicised levels of pay for vice-chancellors, have come from across the House. It has also been reported Downing Street has arranged meetings with former universities minister Lord Willetts, which could imply a forthcoming shift in policy.

The Higher Education and Research Act was only recently passed, and any major shake up to funding, although potentially politically appealing, would need wide, thorough and persuasive consultation with the sector. Given an increasing appetite to woo younger voters and reopen the inevitably heated discussion on fees, and the non-binding opposition victory over revoking the regulations brought in to increase the fee cap to £9,250 per year, one could predict action of sorts will be taken on the issue shortly.

On skills policy, the deadline for the Government's ambitious target of achieving three million new apprenticeship starts by 2020 is approaching faster than the Department for Education and Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) may wish. The apprenticeship levy was introduced in April this year so it's very early days in terms of assessing where it is being complied with and/or resulting in businesses offering more apprenticeships. The pressure to deliver on this commitment now not only stems from maintaining the party's reputation, but also that fears of a post-Brexit skills crisis are unfounded.

With May keen to reignite her domestic policy agenda as an antidote to the Brexit-heavy nature of the current climate, we may see this year's Conservative Party conference used as a launchpad for new educational policy. Watch this space...

[Education and skills](#) ^[1]

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