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Written by Andrew McQuillan, Political Consultant on 10 October 2017



Despite the contrasting atmospheres in Brighton and Manchester and the tonal differences from the respective party platforms, both Labour and the Conservatives were unanimous about the need to provide an educated and dynamically skilled workforce for the economy of the future.

Issues surrounding funding and the cost of education were not far from the surface. Angela Rayner's impassioned address which focused on the role of education in her life and that of her son was well received not only for its sincerity but its intent. Labour's commitment to a National Education Service was their set-piece conference offer, promising a "cradle to grave" system across all levels of education. A new funding arrangement for Sure Start and the school estate received popular acclaim in the conference hall, however, as with much of Labour's policies, dissenting voices queried how this would be funded.

To Manchester where concern about the Conservatives' relationship with younger voters was on the minds of delegates and policy makers alike. Targeted funding for maths and English hubs, a further wave of 27 Degree Apprenticeship programmes complemented the keynote announcements from Justine Greening regarding tuition fees and changes to the repayment threshold.

Amidst the background noise of her keynote address, the Prime Minister stated providing first class technical education was essential to the “British dream”, alongside building 100 new free schools in every year of this Parliament. May also announced plans to review university funding arrangements. Although the contentious issue of grammar schools was nowhere to be seen following its outing in the manifesto, it remains to be seen whether the policies, particularly on universities, will assuage the Tories’ youth travails.

On the fringes, panellists were all very keen to emphasise the importance of skills, particularly within the context of the industrial strategy. The challenge of automation and artificial was touched on by senior figures including Robert Halfon who stressed the need to simultaneously skill-up the population in-line with innovation.

In Brighton, attention was equally focused on skills, with Gordon Marsden contending more needed to be done to market apprenticeships as a viable career option. Though many speakers expressed fears regarding Brexit, Lisa Nandy exposed Labour’s fractures on the matter by stating freedom of movement resulted in the aspirations of young British people being ignored. At a NASUWT fringe Angela Rayner said the current education system was failing to promote the equalities agenda and that Labour’s new cradle to grave approach would advance BME role models in schools.

On the new National Education Service, the reaction of stakeholders to Rayner’s speech praised it as a “step in the right direction”, with the pledge to increase the funding available to Sure Start programmes warmly welcomed by the unions.

There was a welcome if guarded response from some stakeholders towards the Conservatives’ flagship announcements on tuition fees and university funding. Questions regarding the sustainability of the further education sector were raised and it remains to be seen whether the review of the fee repayment threshold will go far enough to address what has become one of the most hotly contested subjects in British politics in recent years.

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

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