



Education policy in 2023 – what to expect?

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Last year was marked by unprecedented political and economic volatility. We've seen challenges related to the Covid pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the death of Queen Elizabeth II. There was also a long drawn-out Conservative Party leadership contest (followed by another, shorter, Conservative Party leadership contest) and numerous ministerial reshuffles.

Yet rather than offering reassurance, we enter 2023 against the backdrop of high inflation, the cost-of-living crisis, NHS pressures and record waiting lists as well as a 'winter of discontent' with widespread strikes by a number of public sector departments affecting a range of key public services.

A year ago, in early 2022, there was a sense of direction in education policy. After a three-year delay, The Department for Education published a response to the long-awaited Augar review and various higher education (HE) consultations (including a controversial consultation on minimum eligibility requirements and student number controls), a Schools White Paper, and the SEND Green Paper, while the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 became law.

Five education secretaries later, despite a welcome £2.3bn cash boost for schools at the Autumn Statement and the Prime Minister's proposal for all school pupils to study "some form of maths" until the age of 18, education policy has generally been deprioritised. In 2023, the Government will likely try to avoid any controversial or lengthy policy proposals. Instead, they will focus on their manifesto for the next general election, which is now a maximum of two years away.

Schools

A few weeks ago the new Education Secretary Gillian Keegan made her first appearance before the Education Select Committee. She confirmed that the Schools Bill will not progress in this parliamentary session. Nevertheless, Keegan told MPs that the DfE "remains committed to the objectives" which underpinned the Bill.

However, one of the key original pledges, the ambition for all schools to become academies by 2030, has slipped down the list of DfE priorities. The Government is likely to take a more pragmatic approach and

encourage medium-sized trusts.

It has also been confirmed that the Government's proposed actions in response to the SEND Review and the Independent review of children's social care led by Josh MacAlister are likely to be published by March 2023.

More recently, it's been reported that 'Rishi Sunak wants all pupils to study some form of maths to age 18'¹. However, the Prime Minister's proposed plans would not be achieved in this parliament and could be threatened by a shortage of maths teachers.

Higher Education

Besides legislative developments in 2022, including the Skills and Post-16 Education Act, the Advanced Research and Invention Agency Act, and the ongoing Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, we also saw the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's departure and a set of contested measures introduced by the Office for Students. There was also some speculation about Sunak's plan to limit foreign student numbers.

The broad thrust of higher education policy is likely to continue as it is at present – that is, with a heightened emphasis on quality within the sector and on student outcomes. In 2023, it is therefore likely that we would largely see a largely unchanged policy trajectory for the HE sector, with fiscal prudence at its heart.

Further Education

A recent Times article² reported that 'Britain is in the midst of a skills crisis. It is lacking a workforce both for the high-tech roles of the future and lower-paid roles in bars and restaurants.' Moreover, a report published, by the Resolution Foundation think tank, *Train in Vain*³, shows that the proportion of employees who report having had recent work-related training fell from 29 per cent in 2002 to 24 per cent in 2020.

With this in mind, what is the Government going to do in 2023? Robert Halfon, Minister of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (as well as a former Education Committee Chair), has recently ruled out Apprenticeship Levy reform and provided no further details on the British Baccalaureate. However, the DfE's Director of Professional and Technical Education provided further detail on level 2 and 3 review, focusing on good quality, progression and employers' needs.

Early years

The Covid pandemic has been particularly challenging for nurseries, pre-schools and other early years settings. Ofsted reported that children who had been hardest hit by the pandemic actually regressed in terms of their basic skills and learning.

In 2022, both Boris Johnson and Liz Truss advocated loosening staff-to-child-ratios (the number of staff required to care for children) to reduce childcare cost. However,

it's believed that Rishi Sunak 'has abandoned plans to relax staff-to-child ratios in nurseries, alongside scrapping other childcare reforms'⁴.

In December 2022, the Education Committee launched an inquiry into support for childcare and the early years. In its words: 'the inquiry will examine how easy to navigate the current childcare system is for parents and carers, and whether current childcare entitlements are providing families with affordable and flexible childcare. The Committee will assess the effectiveness of the different funding entitlements, including those funded by the Department for Education, the Tax-Free Childcare scheme and support for childcare from the benefits and tax credit system. It will also look at the current workforce issues faced by early years practitioners, and the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic may have worsened existing workforce challenges.'⁵

Therefore, it is likely that in 2023 there will be increased scrutiny of the sector, but it is uncertain whether the Government will implement any substantial policy changes - although its thinking is likely to become clearer when DfE ministers give evidence to the inquiry and then, later in 2023, when they formally respond to the Committee's recommendations (as they're obliged to do).

Please get in touch if you enjoyed reading this article or if you can name all education secretaries of 2022.

References

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