

National College Chairs Strategy Group

What are the Main Political Parties are Proposing for Further Education? – Update

1. Introduction

In case anyone is not aware of it, we are now very firmly in the run up period to the next General Election which will almost certainly take place by the autumn of this year. In this context, it is important that we should keep a close eye on the emerging plans and policies for further education that the main political parties are developing and intend to present to the electorate. In this short report, we will provide a summary of the latest declared policy positions of the 3 main parties that have emerged since the main party conferences last autumn and how we may respond to these and seek to influence them over the next few months.

2. The Conservative Party

2.1 As the current party in government, the Conservative Party clearly has a track record to defend in implementing policy on the sector, but the main indicators of their future plans can be drawn from speeches and statements issued by the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Skills Robert Halfon and the Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan at the Conservatory Party Conference in November, and in other forums since then.

2.2 The party's main policy themes and proposals are as follows;

(i) **The Advanced British Standard (ABS), a new Baccalaureate style qualification for 16 – 19 year olds that would bring A levels and T levels together in a single qualification.** Each student would take 5 subjects with 1,475 learning hours over 2 years and would have to continue studying English and Maths until age 18. This reform will take place over a 10 year period and is being put forward as part of a concerted attempt to address the status differential between academic and vocational learning routes and pathways with Mr Halfon criticising the focus in the UK education system on universities and advocating more vocational routes and 'skills, skills, skills'.

(ii) **The continued roll out of T levels linked to the development of the ABS.** This will be done in the context widespread criticisms of the process to date. The proposed defunding of existing level 3 qualifications, including BTECs, will continue which could reduce progression to and participation in level 3 learning overall, including for the most disadvantaged groups of learners.

(iii) **Properly resourcing FE and tackling wider funding.** This commitment, although welcome in its own right, will need to be considered in the context of the lack of future funding commitments to support it and the significant reductions of funding that have taken place particularly in adult education budgets over the last decade or so.

(iv) **An expansion in apprenticeship provision, including degree apprenticeships to tackle skill shortages.** Gillian Keegan has said that she wants stronger collaboration between education providers and employers through apprenticeships, Skills Boot Camps and the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and more Institutes of Technology. Although there was some criticism at the party's conference of the operation of the Apprenticeship Levy, no new proposals have been made to date.

(v) **Further devolution of responsibility for funding,** particularly the adult skills budget, and expansion of the role of Learning and Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) in supporting cooperation between providers and employers in identifying and addressing skills needs at local level.

(vi) **Measures to address the staff recruitment and retention crisis in the sector,** building on the recent proposed £30k over 5 years tax free bonuses recently to the salaries of new staff in some shortage subjects and deprived areas.

3. The Labour Party

3.1 As the main opposition party, the Labour party has produced a policy document, 'Breaking Down the Barriers to Opportunity' which includes a section, 'Provide pathways to good prospects for all' which addresses its post 16 education priorities. There have also been a number of speeches and statements issued at the party's conference and in other forums since then, particularly by the Shadow secretary of State for Skills Seema Malhotra MP and Shadow Secretary of State for Education Bridget Phillipson.

3.2 The party's main themes and proposals to date include;

(i) **The creation of a new body, Skills England** which will bring together central and local government businesses, training providers and unions to develop a National Plan for Skills.

(ii) **Combining and devolving education budgets, particularly adult education, to Metro Mayors and combined authorities to provide a simplified funding landscape** to enable colleges to meet local skills needs and priorities more effectively and provide greater clarity on training options for individuals and employers.

(iii) **The conversion of the current Apprenticeships Levy into a Growth and Skills Levy** with companies having the freedom to use up to 50% of their levy contributions on non-apprenticeship training with at least 50% reserved for apprenticeships. Skills England will hold a list of approved qualifications on which businesses can spend their levy money, and this will include modular courses in priority skill areas such as green skills and social care, to support more regular and flexible access to training opportunities.

(iv) **Support for qualifications reform including the roll out of T levels which Labour says has been mismanaged, but the defunding of other level 3 qualifications would be suspended and reviewed.** It criticises the Advanced British Standard proposal as ‘undeliverable, in its current form’ but hasn’t indicated whether it supports an alternative model.

(v) **The development of new specialist ‘Technical Excellence Colleges’** which will seek to enhance the role of local businesses in delivering skills and ensuring that communities have skills to meet the needs of local economies. There is only limited information available on this proposal, but the indicator is that they will focus on specific priority skill areas and involve greater collaboration between colleges and that there will be a bidding process. They would be informed through a continuing role for reformed Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) which will be extended to include universities.

(vi) **Promoting strengthened partnership working between tertiary education providers and collaboration between colleges and universities** along with improved ‘seamless’ progression pathways for learners across the system.

(vii) **Reversing the trend of declining numbers of people participating in further education and training.** Targets set include at least 75% of young people to be qualified at level 3 by 2030 and 80% by 2035, 85% to be in sustained education, by 2030 and 70% moving into higher education opportunities by 2030, but as yet no firm funding commitments have been made alongside this.

4. The Liberal Democrat Party

4.1 Liberal Democrat Party proposals have been gradually emerging in recent months through reports on policy discussions that took place at their annual conference in the autumn and speech, statements and interviews by Munira Wilson, their education spokesperson and Sarah Olney, their Treasury and business spokesperson.

4.2 The party's main themes and proposals to date include the following;

(i) A commitment to increase per student funding in schools and colleges above inflation every year. They have pledged to review FE funding and exempt colleges from VAT. They have also expressed particular concern that the average FE salary is £9000 less than secondary school teachers and the impact that this has had on the shortage of lecturers in Maths, English and other areas.

(ii) A £10,000 'Skills Wallet' for every adult to be spent on "education and training throughout their lives". This would be provided over a 30 year period; £4,000 by the age of 25, £3,000 at age 40, and another £3,000 at age 55.

(iii) Support for Qualifications Reform through a standing commission to build a long term consensus across parties, school and college leaders and other stakeholders to broaden the curriculum and create a curriculum fit for the 21st century. The party has described the Advanced British Standard as a 'vanity project' and whilst it supports the achievement of parity of esteem between academic and vocation routes it is concerned that the scrapping of BTEC qualifications could reduce opportunities for learners who could most benefit from a mix of academic and applied qualifications for whom T level entry requirements are currently too high.

(iii) An increase in apprenticeship pay to "at least the minimum wage" to counter high drop-out rates, and an expansion in the "*broken*" apprenticeship levy into a "*broader and more flexible*" skills and training levy. The party wants to '*fix the broken apprenticeship system*' by making it more flexible to meet employer and learner needs more effectively.

(iv) A commitment to "expand opportunities for young people to study, teach and volunteer abroad" by returning to the EU's Erasmus Plus programme as an associated country.

5. Next Steps

5.1 The National College Chairs Strategy Group is a rapidly growing independent group of further education college chairs and governors who believe that the expertise of the non-executive leadership in the college sector needs to be harnessed and given a voice in contributing to the debate on major issues

impacting the sector. In the next few months, as we get closer to the general election, we will be approaching the main skills and education spokespersons of each of the potential parties to discuss their proposals with them.

- 5.2 We will also be discussing our own ideas with them, a number of which were included in our recent report *“Skills and Growth; Post 16 Education That Works”*. Key recommendations in the report included;
- Development of an integrated national post 16 education and skills strategy which covers all parts of the system, vocational and academic, designed to enable every young person and adult to achieve and maintain the skills they need throughout their working lives and employers to access the labour they need to improve productivity, innovate and maximise competitiveness.
 - Development of a qualifications system that brings together technical and academic learning opportunities for young people and adults. This should include a more integrated approach to remove the status differences between technical and academic qualifications as well as maximising flexibility and progression opportunities for learners.
 - A major increase in investment in post 16 education and skills from government and employers including a focus on;
 - Explicitly recognising at policy level the lead role of further education as the key driver in tackling the country’s vocational skills needs.
 - Ensuring that further and vocational education should achieve at least a parity of funding with other parts of the education system.
 - Seeking to achieve parity of funding on technical education with the OECD average and / or with spending in comparable OECD economies.
 - Establishing equality of staff pay between college teaching staff and staff in schools and universities.
 - Establishing a simpler, more dynamic and flexible funding and regulatory framework for further education with fewer funding and regulatory bodies.
 - Shorter term proposals include;
 - An immediate review of the apprenticeship programme to reverse the dramatic decline in the number of young people undertaking apprenticeships.
 - A suspension of the proposed defunding of existing level 3 and below VTQs in the absence of evidence that T levels are

providing equivalent accessibility and progression opportunities for learners particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- The introduction of a universal entitlement to a full level 3 qualification building on the Lifetime Skills Guarantee.

5.3 We will keep you posted on our progress. If you feel that you have a contribution to make and would like to get involved in our work please contact us at enquiries@nationalcollegechairs.com