

Education and Skills: *Across the Political Landscape*

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**Lifelong
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LEI Thinks

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Executive Summary

The Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens, the Scottish National Party (SNP), and Plaid Cymru are the six main political parties in the UK, representing millions of citizens. In this thinkpiece, the Lifelong Education Institute explores how the subjects of education and skills were discussed at these parties' conferences in September and October 2023. It evaluates the diverse policy positions espoused across the political landscape and considers their principal areas of focus and consideration. It concludes with key reflections on the main areas of consensus across the parties in opposition, and how the issues discussed by these politicians look set to shape future advances in UK lifelong learning policy.

Recommendations

1. Introduce concrete measures to address the needs of adult learners, laying out plans which are applicable for those already in professions, be they in early or mid-career stages.
2. Implement increased hours of free Government-funded childcare to allow more parents greater flexibility to work and also potentially take time to retrain.
3. Create a Growth and Skills Levy to drive new opportunities and the promotion of training programmes and upskilling, with future conversations to be had multilaterally, with learners, workers, and employers.
4. Invest in the training and the retention of teachers and in the provision of further support for students and staff to increase equal opportunities, regardless of social class and economic background.
5. Rebalance education policy competences between Holyrood, the Senedd and Westminster going forward.
6. Increase cooperation and lesson-learning between the four devolved nations on education, training and skills, so as to help address many shared issues.
7. Identify and evaluate measures to achieve high numeracy and literacy levels across society and help their development beyond early-years and pre-16 learning.
8. Increase parity of esteem between academic and technical education in avenues, beyond the new Advanced British Standard, which can benefit different types of learners and from all backgrounds.
9. Advance the importance of technical and vocational skills in the development of new opportunities for young people when they leave school, further or higher education and they enter the working world.
10. Involve learners in decision-making processes to ensure that strategies for education and skills development are indeed for all, from early years to the seniors in our society.

Figure 1: Political Parties and their 2023 Conferences Information

Political Party	Leader/Co-Leaders	Education Spokesperson	Dates and Location of Party Conference
Liberal Democrat	Ed Davey - MP for Kingston & Surbiton	-	Saturday 23 – Tuesday 26 September 2023, Bournemouth
Conservative	Rishi Sunak – Prime Minister and MP for Richmond (Yorks)	Gillian Keegan – Education Secretary and MP for Chichester.	Sunday 1 – Wednesday 4 October 2023, Manchester
Green	Carla Denyer & Adrian Ramsay. Denyer is a Bristol City Councillor. Ramsay is CEO of two national environmental charities, senior lecturer in environmental politics and economics, and leader of the MCS Charitable Foundation.	-	Friday 6 – Saturday 7 October 2023, Brighton
Plaid Cymru	Rhun ap Iorwerth - Member of the Senedd for Ynys Môn (Plaid Cymru).	-	Friday 6 – Saturday 7 October 2023, Aberystwyth
Labour	Sir Keir Starmer – MP for Holborn and St Pancras	Bridget Phillipson – Shadow Education Secretary for Education and MP for Houghton and Sunderland South.	Sunday 8 – Wednesday 11 October 2023, Liverpool
Scottish National Party	Humza Yousaf – First Minister of Scotland and MSP for Glasgow Pollok.	Jenny Gilruth – Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills of Scotland and MSP for Mid Fife and Glenrothes	Sunday 15 – Tuesday 17 October 2023, Aberdeen

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2023 autumn party conferences saw interventions on skills and education policy on a range of scales from the six major political parties in the UK: (in chronological order) the Liberal Democrats, Conservatives, Green, Plaid Cymru, Labour, and the Scottish National Party (SNP). As these parties jockey for advantage ahead of the next General Election, key questions of training and upskilling occupy various positions within their overarching future policy agendas. When party leaderships speak, the people listen and dissect their positions on the many issues that are central to their lives, such as health, social care, defence, education, and more. In this context, it is vital for individuals and organisations active in education space to understand the implications of parties' emerging views for the future of the sector.

This thinkpiece by the Lifelong Education Institute focuses on the conference speeches given by party leaders and (where relevant) the serving and shadow education secretaries and spokespeople on the subject of education and skills. It provides a detailed overview of the positions espoused across the political landscape within and across the UK, and considers their principal areas of focus and consideration as well as their key omissions. Concluding remarks will provide reflections on the key areas of consensus across the parties in opposition, and offer a future-facing assessment of how the issues raised at the party conferences look set to shape the contours of lifelong learning policy after the next General Election.

2. THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

This section explores how the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party (SNP) have discussed the subjects of education and skills during their parties' conferences in September and October 2023. It examines the diverse policy positions espoused across the political landscape and considers their principal areas of focus and consideration.

2.1 Conservatives

As the UK's current governing party, the Conservative Party enjoys the unique ability to set the pace for the UK's education policy agenda. Education, training, and skills were covered in the conference contributions of Rishi Sunak, the UK Prime Minister, amid comments on the UK's positions on national defence and security, transport, Brexit, and UK–EU relations, and Gillian Keegan, the serving Education Secretary since October 2022, focused her interventions on the need to revitalise the UK education system. Both also outlined the Conservatives' stance on the future direction of their policies, should they continue in power.

[Education Policy Record](#)

Sunak's remarks on education began with his perceived views on the various successes of Conservative policy implementations. These centred on how: 'of what we have done in government since 2010, what I am proudest of is our record on education'. These confident pronouncements included mention of the rapid rise of British schools in international league tables, in comparison to their previous decline under Labour, and the Prime Minister's belief that education is 'the closest thing to a silver bullet we have ... [...] the best economic policy, the best social policy, the best moral policy'. He also noted that 'it is the best way to spread opportunity and create a more prosperous society'. This optimistic sentiment was echoed by Keegan. She gave central place to the message that the Conservatives 'are the only party that will make the long-term decisions to give our children the bright future that they deserve', thus seeking to position the Conservatives as the only apparent option for protecting and furthering education. Keegan's similarities in language with that of the Prime Minister were also apparent on (1) Conservative strategy for the future development of the UK education system, and (2) the steps that would be taken to both reform, and often maintain current policies, should the Conservatives continue in power.

[Childcare and Potential Pathways to Learning](#)

Echoing Sunak, Keegan observed that just as a shortage of opportunities failed many of her contemporaries when she was at school, women are also being failed by issues pertaining to childcare. Keegan emphasised how 'women who were top of their class, got the highest grades, the best starting jobs [...] had to watch the opportunities that used to be there disappear, watch their careers end prematurely'. This important reflection therefore highlights a need for more inclusive childcare. It is similarly a nod towards an acknowledgement of how the weight of childcare has often fallen on women. This stance was reinforced by Keegan with promises on her intention to increase the number

of hours of free childcare. With regard to lifelong learning, here we can see important opportunities start to emerge. The option to have greater support with family care will provide parents, and especially women, with more flexibility regarding with their time and jobs. This will, not only, permit them to further their career progression, but also expand their prospects of learning and upskilling.

Educational success

Sunak's outlook on the achievements of Conservative education policies was further supported by his view that, 'state schools in some of the most deprived parts of the country, [are] producing some of the best results'. These considerations were also part of his view that students' success is linked to their choices whilst at secondary school, and up until university level learning. He argued that 'these state schools, empowered by reform, don't think there are limits to these children because of the postcode they were born in. Rather, they demand, inspire and deliver excellence'. Labour, Sunak maintained, would not have delivered these positive results; it had instead 'pursued a false dream of 50% of children going to university and abandoned apprenticeships'. These remarks indicate a criticism of Labour's apparent prioritising of higher education, and consequent lack of attention on further education. This is an issue which arguably needs to be better addressed in lifelong learning approaches, such as via tertiary integration, as vocational learning and further education courses often neglected in favour of the attainment of university degrees.

School Systems

Sunak and Keegan's speeches gave a clear emphasis and prioritisation to the current learning environment in England. Comparisons were also unfavourably made regarding the educational standards of the other devolved nations. This included Keegan's opinion that 'we're rising in the international league tables, Labour-run Wales and SNP-run Scotland are slipping behind'. These views of Conservative success in England were especially tied to the structure and pedagogy of its school system. Keegan outlined how Conservative initiatives had increased schools' quality and reach, and how they had 'reformed the school system (...) reformed teacher training [and] (...) reformed the curriculum'. Other victories included the implementation of new approaches, such as how 'phonics checks are ensuring children leave school able to read properly'. School systems in England had therefore clearly improved, with 'our free schools are driving up choice and standards', and ultimately 'the results speak for themselves – our children are now the best in the West for reading. It's a phenomenal achievement and I'm determined that it's Maths next'. Keegan, nevertheless, did mention in her speech the recent issues that are increasingly being faced in schools. These included reference to the 'impact of smartphones in our schools. The distraction, the disruption, the bullying,' and her declaration that strikes and strikers are also a problem. Noting the way in which many schools have banned the use of phones in school, Keegan announced that the Conservative Government would work to ensure that all schools followed suit.

Post-16 Education

Sunak declared that the Conservatives are committed to achieving parity of esteem between academic and technical education, primarily by making the exam/qualification system more

“European”. The Prime Minister explained that achieving this required the implementation of new policies in the British education system. These included the development of a ‘new rigorous, knowledge-rich Advanced British Standard, which will bring together A-Levels and T-Levels into a new, single qualification for our school leavers’. This more streamlined strategy would therefore involve students sitting exams for an Advanced British Standard that mirrors many elements of the existing International Baccalaureate system.

The Conservatives’ new education policy statements also featured a desire to make core subjects, such as maths and English, staples in post-16 education and learning. Sunak emphasised the importance of literacy and numeracy: with the planned ‘Advanced British Standard, all students will study some form of English and maths to 18, with extra help for those who struggle most’. This tied into Sunak’s views on the clear existing differences between the UK education system and that of other countries. He made the point that Sixth Formers’ spend ‘around a third less time in the classroom than some of our competitors’, and claimed that with the introduction of an ‘Advanced British Standard, students will spend at least 195 hours more with a teacher’. This would ensure more hours for students in school, but also impose larger responsibilities for teachers and staff.

Sunak also connected education with employability and earning potential, observing that ‘A-Levels students, generally, only do three subjects compared to the seven studied by our economic competitors’. This was the first of several points where the Prime Minister argued in favour of students studying subjects which increase their likelihood of becoming higher earners. To challenge these learning discrepancies between the UK and abroad, the Prime Minister noted how ‘the Advanced British Standard will change that too, with students now, typically, studying five subjects and thanks to the extra teaching time we are introducing this greater breadth won’t come at the expense of the depth which is such a strength of our system’.

While access to a wider curriculum of subjects is an important component of lifelong learning, the implementation of any new system should only be enacted following consultation with learners. They are at the heart of the issue. This would involve speaking with student groups and unions, including trade unions. Following the difficulties and disruptions already caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, any major change to the schooling framework must be embarked upon with due diligence and care towards students’ mental health, and their ability to meet new demands.

[University and Apprenticeships](#)

Both Sunak and Keegan’s speeches highlighted the range of existing options for post-18 education, including choices to study at university or undertake an apprenticeship. Both offered reflections on (1) the decision to pursue a university education, (2) the importance of course selection, and (3) learners’ subsequent entrance into the working world. Sunak challenged the choice to go to university in the first place, explaining that he considered this ‘one of the great mistakes of the last 30 years’. The Prime Minister argued that young people’s decision to go to university had led to their studying for degrees ‘that did nothing to increase their employability or earnings potential’. This was followed by his stating that the Conservatives were going to halt ‘universities from enrolling students on courses that do nothing for their life chances’ and from offering ‘rip-off degrees’. This view by Sunak has important knock-on-effects for any policies regarding lifelong learning. This due to the risk of a

potentially negative enforcement of arbitrary judgment on the value of a degree or similar qualification in a person's professional development and overall learning.

Keegan mirrored Sunak's position, arguing that 'university is not the only option' and how 'it makes no sense to set an arbitrary target of 50% of kids going to university, when we need 100% of kids getting great opportunities', Keegan explained that apprenticeships would become the new route into more professions, and would be a manner to relieve learners from accruing a student debt. These new steps would include making 'apprenticeships the way you become a teacher, a doctor, a lawyer, even a space engineer'. This indicates a new angle to Conservative policy, with the aim of introducing new vocational pathways to enter more traditionally academic careers and subject areas.

Economic Incentives for Teachers

Achieving the Conservatives' new education goals implies a need for more teachers, as well as an increase in schools' capacity. New Conservative plans to help achieve these ambitions and swell the ranks of the teaching professions will include the introduction of economic incentives. Sunak outlined how 'in order to attract and retain more teachers, those who teach key subjects in schools and, for the first time, our further education colleges too, will receive special bonuses of up to £30,000 tax free over the first five years of their career'. The success of this financial inducement will need to be determined in future, but this scheme is intended to help teachers feel supported and valued. This plan is a valuable contribution to the development of lifelong learning policy. With greater teacher and educator support there should be a positive effect on learners and learning environments. In turn, we need better avenues for people with practical expertise to be given explicit teaching involvements as part of their work.

Strikes (School and University Level)

Keegan's acknowledgment that Conservatives 'know that teachers are struggling' and 'need support' lies in stark contrast to her views on strikes and unionised action. Expressing her position on school strikes, Keegan described how 'they thought you could strike your way to a better job' and how she 'thought it's common sense that we'd have better jobs if the factory remained open'. This was later followed by further critiques of the strikes carried out at university level. Keegan explained that the Conservative Government would seek to 'consult to introduce minimum service levels in universities, so that they have the tools to make sure that students get the teaching they deserve'. This can be read as a further indication of future new steps by the Conservatives towards restricting strike action by educators and workers. With teachers and lectures striking over important issues such as low pay, long hours and lack of support, the Conservatives must act to find a solution.

2.2 Labour

As the main party in opposition, Labour has sought to position itself strongly on the importance of education and skills development. Sir Keir Starmer, the Labour leader, and Bridget Phillipson, the Shadow Education Secretary, both spoke on several key areas of education policy, and outlined their

views on the important changes that Labour aim to bring into Government, should they come to power in the next General Election.

Educational Success

Starmer emphasised that greater investment must be made in the key areas of health and education, and named education as an essential national interest of the UK. Labour's view was positioned as a stark contrast to the neglectful attitude held by the Conservatives.

Starmer noted how he did not 'just see the crumbling concrete in our schools. I see the teachers, in the temporary classrooms, still giving our children the education they deserve'. This clear praise and commendation of the dedication of teachers lay alongside criticism of the detrimental levels of attention given by the Conservative Government to school buildings and their infrastructure, emblematic of a general lack of care and attention: 'an approach as riven through the foundations of our security as the crumbling concrete in our schools.'

Phillipson, in turn, emphasised the need for education to be a route to success and opportunity for all citizens. She also delivered another clear criticism of the Conservative Government's positioning, this time on their current line of development on core skills. Her comments that 'background will be no barrier to opportunity [...] and education is the key to that,' run closely parallel to Starmer's remarks on the importance of breaking down obstacles to education, and especially those which are linked to social class and other instances of inequality.

The Shadow Education Secretary also highlighted that to be able to effectively tackle the existing attainment gap in education, it would be necessary for Labour to 'roll out early interventions to transform children's speech and language skills' as well as 'tackle our chronic cultural problem with maths, by making sure it's better taught at six, never mind 16'. This forms part of several plans by the Labour Party to help reform the learning of mathematics, especially at primary education level. To do this effectively, Phillipson identified the need for 'better training for teachers to teach, with confidence and success. Better standards for our children, so they're set up to succeed'. The inclusions in her speech of the need for more improved training for teachers are important to the advancement of lifelong learning initiatives, such as a pathway to allow educators to continue their professional development. They also tie into the creation of opportunities for upskilling and the need to improve current pathways to instigate higher quality education.

Private Schools and Social Inequality

Starmer and Phillipson both spoke assertively on the issue of private schools, their current status, and their contributing factors to levels of social inequality. The Labour leader, in particular, argued that the existing funding discrepancies between private and state schools were a core problem. Private schools are also granted charitable status, which means that they do not pay corporation tax, capital gains tax, or stamp duty. Starmer discussed how, 'if we ignore appeals for the status quo on private school tax breaks or an outdated national curriculum, then we can have mental health staff in every school' as well as have the opportunity for 'more expert teachers in the classroom. More creativity, speaking skills, confidence. Shatter the class ceiling at source'. These words can be understood to

showcase a potential Labour reversal of the tax breaks granted for private and independent schools, which are all currently exempt from VAT. These steps by Labour would therefore be enacted in combination with the development of new pathways of allocation for the money gained from this transformation.

These views by Labour on the future of private schools were also tied to a consideration of the levels of social inequality present in the UK, as well as Conservative elitism. Phillipson expanded on how, under the Conservative Government, ‘apprenticeships [were] down. Qualification reforms, botched then junked. A levy on employers that doesn’t deliver for companies or communities, for individuals or for our economy’ and how many of these issues were targeted at ‘other people’s children. Our children, not theirs’. This reaffirms a connection consistently made by Labour on social inequality, class differences, and education. Phillipson argued that this problem is also tied to accessibility and universities, where ‘degrees are for their children, not ours: it’s never their kids’ choices or chances, that they’re keen to wind back’. She also mentioned that this attitude extended to how ‘student debt for nurses, for young people starting out, looking to buy a home and build a family – not their problem. Other people’s children’.

Universities and Vocational Skills Development

Both Starmer and Phillipson provided important insights regarding Labour’s positions on universities, further education, vocational learning and the close links between communities and their local economies. Phillipson, for example, firmly underscored the prominence of universities and higher learning to her party. She argued how ‘we’ll change the way students pay for their time at university, so none of our young people, fear the price they’ll pay for the choice they’d like’. This was supported by how she noted that ‘after 13 years of drift, Labour will create Skills England to bring leadership and ambition to England’s skills system’ and the planned establishment of ‘a Growth and Skills Levy driving opportunity in every workplace’. This was further linked to training and technical colleges and a clear emphasis was made on ‘skills not just for each of us, but for all of us’. These views therefore contribute to further understanding Labour’s plans for lifelong learning and upskilling. Although there was no mention of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) in her speech, Phillipson’s comments do invite a consideration of what Labour will do to support learners. The introduction of larger grants to help students, especially those from lower economic backgrounds, to pay for their time in higher and further education would be a helpful solution.

Universities and issues regarding accessibility were also brought into the Labour leader’s speech. There was also a pronounced note on the continued lack of attention currently given by the Conservatives to create opportunities for the development of vocational skills and new prospects for those from working class or lower socio-economic backgrounds. Starmer referred to his own family background and used this as a means to criticise the Government’s overall attitude towards this subject. He spoke on how he ‘never thought I would hear a modern Conservative Prime Minister say that 50% of our children going to university was a “false dream”. My Dad felt the disrespect of vocational skills all his life. But the solution is not and never will be levelling-down the working class aspiration to go to university’.

The Labour Party's commitments towards the future were also made clearer in their views on Further Education and vocational learning. This attitude can be understood to showcase how closely community and local economies can be tied, and that this legacy and pride is part of the motivation and will to succeed for many young people. Starmer stressed that Labour would now 'commit to a new generation of colleges. Technical Excellence Colleges. Colleges with stronger links to their local economies. Planted firmly in the ground of young peoples' aspiration. But also in the pride, the pull of the badge on the shirt, the ambition you feel when building a legacy for your community'. Certain sectors in England were additionally singled out by Starmer, such as 'training lab workers in Derbyshire. Automotive Engineers in Wolverhampton. Computer Scientists in Manchester. Nuclear Technicians in Somerset. Builders in Staffordshire. Toolmakers in Hull.' As we can note, these are sectors which have a strong potential for the British future economy as well as being areas of skills development in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) as well as other vocational pathways. Labour's comments on these subjects therefore invite them to take a more pronounced stance on lifelong learning and commit to the creation of clearly defined and actionable means to support learners and workers.

[Early Learning and Childcare](#)

Labour's stance on early years education, outlined by Phillipson, was also linked to the importance of childcare. This position by Labour can be interpreted as a new manner in which they seek to provide a better fundamental level of education for children across the UK. This is also a useful indicator on a re-framing of a continuous lifelong learning strategy, with its foundations being strengthened. Phillipson summarised the creation of an approach dedicated to early learning, and included an announcement of how 'Sir David Bell, former primary school teacher, and former Chief Inspector of Schools, will lead Labour's work, to develop the Early Years Plan the next generation deserve'. Labour's acknowledgement of the need to improve education beyond the 16 – 25 paradigm also calls for more attention to be given to developing initiatives which will help support every age, and stage, of a person's learning and development. It is also of note that Phillipson stressed how 'to bring high and rising standards, for the workforce we need, for the qualifications they'll have, for the settings where it'll happen, for the education they'll give, to deliver our ambition for a modernised childcare system, supporting families from the end of parental leave to the end of primary school'. This stance demonstrates an intention to re-shape the current system on childcare, and is a valuable comment on the significance of much needed childcare funding and support for British families.

[Research and Industry](#)

Starmer named Labour's main steps with regard to the advancement of education, research, skills and expertise. He listed: 'Long-term stability for researchers, investors, innovators. A real boost for life sciences and the automotive industry. And a British jobs bonus that will attract new investment to our industrial heartlands from Bridgend to Burnley. The backbone of Britain, once again powering us towards national renewal'. He went on to build on the connection between research and industry improvement: 'A new direction for skills. Because a future must be trained as well as built. And the generation that sacrificed so much during the pandemic – their potential must be backed'. This

positioning by Labour is significant in demonstrating the value of upskilling, and also helps to highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic hindered a lot of progress in skills development.

Learning from the Devolved Nations

Starmer stressed the importance of the UK, its unity and shared values. This was included in his mention of how, ‘Scotland has the skills. Scotland has the ingenuity. And Scotland is at the heart of a Britain built to last. That’s what the people of Rutherglen voted for’. Considering the budding presence of Scottish Labour in Holyrood, this comment is an indicative nod towards the existing political ties across the devolved nations, as well as the possibility of learning from the SNP. It also suggests that a new Government, led by Labour, could seek to reach more hands across the border to cooperate in Scotland, and especially in the enhancement of skills and training.

2.3 Liberal Democrats

Liberal Democrat’s leader Ed Davey spoke on the need to harness the economy, including ‘investing in people through education’ as well as pushing for greater attention on training and skills. Other areas predominantly focused on were the NHS and the wider health sector. Davey also made a note on the importance of research and stressed that ‘it’s the job of government to back research like this, so scientists and doctors can make the next breakthrough, and the one after that, and the one after’. These positions were spotlighted as part of the Liberal Democrats’ policies and strategy development, as well as how their ‘plan for social care and family care is a central part of our plan for the future Health Service’. While Davey’s speech lacked a deep consideration of lifelong learning initiatives, his mention of areas of the economy and the public sector that rely on injections of upskilling is useful to note. The Liberal Democrats have previously championed several lifelong learning initiatives, including the creation of a “Skills Wallet”. This would be a dedicated fund to help adults retrain during their working lives. The Government would contribute, in stages, up to £10,000 per adult between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-five. Employers and individuals would also then be able to make additional payments when and if needed.

2.4 Green

In their speech, Green co-leaders of the Green Party, Carla Denyer and Adrian Ramsay spoke on their party’s primary agenda, which focuses on the green energy, the climate, pollution, the various existing issues with the UK’s position on oil and gas, as well as society inequality. While education was not featured in this speech, the Green Party is nevertheless a party which has previously shown a dedicated position on the importance of lifelong learning. This is stance which has been noted previously by the Greens and has the aim for contributions regarding the development of a healthy society, promoting greater accessibility and instilling plans for higher levels of literacy, numeracy and the acquisition of skills and qualifications.

2.5 Plaid Cymru

Plaid Cymru is one of the three major parties in Wales, following Welsh Labour and the Welsh Conservatives. While Labour leads a minority Government, the Llywydd or Presiding Officer of the Senedd is Elin Jones MS from Plaid Cymru. Party leader Rhun ap Iorwerth detailed their policy plans around education, skills, jobs, and societal issues.

Education Policy

In his speech, ap Iorwerth spoke of the need for a united Wales and the importance of a party that represented all Welsh people. He spoke on the need for equal opportunities for children and how ‘the eradication of child poverty [is] a central goal in our mission’ and how Plaid Cymru have ‘a determination to let our young people reach their potential whether born in Bangor or Bridgend, and educated in well-resourced schools, where teachers feel valued’. Ap Iorwerth also presented his party’s views on the future of the British union, including their desire for Welsh independence. Reform of existing societal structures and a push for better education and social care were listed as being of paramount importance. Plaid Cymru’s stance on Welsh independence closely mirrors that of the SNP in Scotland. Independence is seen as a route for a better future. Ap Iorwerth furthermore described how this stance was also rooted in language and his party’s aspiration for ‘a step-change in the provision of Welsh language education – normalising the language and creating confident speakers’. This is a key area of interest in education, and in lifelong learning, with societal progress linked to the importance and preservation of one’s language. Just as the English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programme is a gateway for non-English speakers to integrate into their new communities - the learning of other languages should be seen as a valued means to promote cultural ties. This establishes a need to bring Welsh, and other languages in the UK, into the forefront of lifelong education plans.

Apprenticeships and Universities

Ap Iorwerth gave clear insights on Plaid Cymru’s views on universities and apprenticeships and their links to the future of employment in Wales. He emphasised how ‘through apprenticeships, through supporting our universities and through innovative measures to attract graduates back home, I want our school-leavers to be excited about forging careers here in Wales’. Plaid Cymru’s aspiration for a return of Welsh graduates to Wales - instead of their staying and working in England, elsewhere in the UK, or abroad - is a useful indication of a potential pathway to lifelong learning and skills development in Wales.

Skills

Ap Iorwerth spoke on the need for greater skills development in Wales. He detailed how ‘the long shadow of deindustrialisation has left Wales with stubbornly low wages, meagre productivity levels and a shortage of high-skilled, well-paid jobs’. This outlook was followed by comments on: ‘the current Government’s apparent willingness to just sit back and wait for the next wave of bad news to hit’. This

critique by the Plaid Cymru leader noticeably aimed at both the Senedd, the Welsh devolved parliament, and at the British Government, the two main bodies responsible for Welsh development.

Societal Issues

The Plaid Cymru leader listed other key societal issues affecting Wales. He argued that ‘work in leading innovative policy development will touch on all aspects of life in Wales’, and will need to encompass ‘tackling inequalities, raising standards in education, investing in language and culture, supporting farming and rural Wales, building a transport system that works! And of course tackling the economic challenges that hold us back’. This distinct level of awareness in his speech, of the existence of areas of much needed improvement in Wales, denotes a clear need for an uplifting of its current situation.

2.6 Scottish National Party (SNP)

The Scottish First Minister and SNP leader, Humza Yousaf, spoke only on a few matters pertaining to education. Jenny Gilruth, Scotland’s new serving Education Secretary since March 2023, however, made several important points on the need to revitalise the Scottish education system. Both also outlined their party’s position on the future, the new direction of SNP policies, and their many aspirations for an independent Scotland.

Education Policy

Yousaf explained how the SNP has ‘invested in our schools, with more teachers and higher spending per pupil than anywhere in the UK’ and how they have ‘seen the biggest ever reduction in the attainment gap on literacy and numeracy in primary schools in a single year’. Yousaf’s praises therefore encompass the changes implemented by the SNP in their sixteen years in power, many of which were enacted by his predecessor Nicola Sturgeon.

Education Secretary Gilruth noted her position as a former teacher in her speech and outlined the core values of the SNP Government: ‘Equality. Opportunity. Community’. She also used these values to explain the SNP’s work to promote learning and education in Scotland, and how: ‘education is the best route there is to giving everyone a fair start in life’. Gilruth emphasised to her audience the SNP’s stance on Scottish independence and the need for greater unity in the UK around a progressive stance on education and society. Her examples also included how an independent Scotland would help the more vulnerable in society, such as with foodbanks, as well as the LGBT community, with the promotion of more inclusive education. In a similar approach to Keegan and Phillipson, Gilruth also noted the importance of Government funded childcare, and the need to give greater support to working families. This is significant to understanding the SNP’s future policy on lifelong learning as one which should centre on skills, productivity and inclusion. This is an approach which has also previously been explored by Labour in the Council of Skills Advisors’ report titled, ‘Learning and skills for economic recovery, social cohesion and a more equal Britain’.

Attainment Gap

Gilruth noted how the various successes of the SNP were often held back by the Conservative Government in Westminster. They were named as being responsible for curtailing further progress in Scotland, such as in the creation of a more equal and fair society. Conservatives' cutting of welfare support and enforcing austerity measures were listed as having a detrimental impact on families in Scotland. The SNP's Education Secretary's arguments interconnected with views on how an independent Scotland would benefit greatly from its own control and the SNP's investments in education, such as via the invested '£1 billion in the Scottish Attainment Challenge'. She further contended that Scotland is an encouraging example in the way it views education and classroom learning and this was one of the reasons, 'why we have more teachers per pupil than anywhere else in the UK (...) the highest spending per pupil in the UK (...) [and our] teachers are the best paid in the UK'.

Gilruth also detailed the SNP's reform agenda. This included a plan to 'establish a new Centre of Teaching Excellence, making Scotland a world-leader in new approaches to learning and teaching'. This new initiative would be 'co-designed with our teachers and professional associations, the Centre of Teaching Excellence will put Scotland at the forefront of innovative research' and would be used 'to work together with Local Authorities in our shared, national mission to close the attainment gap and deliver truly excellent learning and teaching to all of our children'. This undertaking by the SNP in delivering quality education is a positive indicator of its stance on lifelong learning, and her arguments emphasised their endeavours to tackle the attainment gap in education. She noted that 'latest primary school attainment figures on literacy and numeracy showed the biggest ever reduction in the attainment gap in a single year' and how 'the poverty-related attainment gap poverty remains narrower than it was pre-pandemic for National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers'.

Early Years Education

Gilruth stated that the SNP has led on many important methods to help young children gain equal access to education, and have a fairer start to life. Examples introduced by the SNP included 'expanding free school meals to P6 and P7 pupils receiving the Scottish Child Payment – in the next step towards universal provision across our primary schools'. This was named as 'the most generous offer of any nation in the UK, saving families £400 per child per year'. Other ways of helping families were also named, such as how the SNP had 'cut the cost of the school day by removing core curriculum charges and we're increasing the school clothing grant in line with inflation'. These initiatives demonstrate a link between a more family-orientated welfare policy and education and is a position shared by Labour, as noted earlier in Phillipson's remarks.

Higher Education

Higher education was also placed at the core of the Education Secretary's speech. She explained the various merits of the SNP's policy approach. These included the achievement of 'a record number of vocational and technical qualifications achieved this year'. Gilruth also brought up the important issues of debt and tuition fees faced in other parts of the UK, and explained how 'never, under any

circumstances, will tuition fees be imposed on Scottish students under an SNP Government'. The position was linked to the promotion of equal opportunities across society and the SNP's 'commitment to equity and excellence in education which is seeing record numbers of first-time students from our poorest communities starting university in Scotland'. Another link between the ways to address societal inequality and education is evident and how a debt-free student could indeed access more opportunities.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thinkpiece has explored the coverage of education and skills in the 2023 conference speeches by the UK's six main political parties. It has aimed to deliver a clear and detailed overview of the views and policy positions espoused across the political landscape. Whilst the speeches analysed have provided an important and valuable indication of parties' views on education, training, and skills, concrete measures to address the needs of working people and adult learners were conspicuously rather absent. Similarly, there has been a consistent lack of attention on the needs of those already in professions, be they in early or mid-career stages. This indicates that a cohesive plan is still needed, one that brings together apprenticeships, flexible childcare, and the introduction of an innovative system that does not only prioritise the few and the wealthy. With the importance of free, Government-funded childcare raised across the political spectrum, this is a step in a positive direction of allowing more parents greater flexibility to work and also potentially take time to retrain. The introduction of a Growth and Skills Levy by Labour could also go some way towards a drive of new opportunities and the promotion of training programmes and upskilling. Future conversations therefore need to be had multilaterally, with learners, workers, and employers.

There are a variety of common areas of consensus among the Westminster opposition parties. These mostly centre on how serious investment is needed in the training and retaining of teachers, and in the provision of further support for students and staff. The importance of creating more equal opportunities, regardless of social class and economic background, is also critical. Scotland and Wales have devolved governments; however, both the SNP and Plaid Cymru have criticised the Conservative Party's Government in Westminster as being short sighted. There is therefore a clear need to rebalance education policy competences between Holyrood, the Senedd and Westminster going forward.

Politicians from across the political spectrum must also address the fragilities in the union. Important exchanges are needed to find solutions that will benefit all British citizens, and not just the English. More cooperation, and the learning of lessons from the four devolved nations on education, training and skills would help address many shared issues. While an emphasis was consistently made by both Labour and the SNP on the need for improvements to primary and secondary schooling, we argue that more is needed. Achieving high numeracy and literacy levels is indeed integral to the development of society. However, this position cannot just be held with regard to early-years and pre-16 learning, but should be identified and evaluated across society.

The introduction of a new Advanced British Standard, bringing together A-Levels and T-Levels, may go some way to achieving Conservative commitments on a parity of esteem between academic and technical education. The reinvigoration and furthering of post-16 education is also a must, but what about the creation of a more vocational pathways portfolio? Or a regional skills observatory? The International Baccalaureate, which has predominantly been the provision of private schools, could instead also be adapted and introduced more widely across the UK. Any new measures need to be evaluated as to how they can benefit different types of learners, and from all backgrounds.

The mention of apprenticeships and universities in the parties' speeches was encouraging and yet, as mentioned by Starmer, the importance of technical and vocational skills is still underappreciated.

Further attention is also needed on the development of new opportunities for young people when they leave school, further or higher education and enter the working world. Investment in learning and skills development for workers and adult learners is also of great value to British society and its economy. This would be a significant measure to increase the availability of literacy and numeracy skills at post-16 level and aid in the development of a lifelong and continued learning for all.

Lifelong learning, is exactly that, a lifelong process. Learners must be consulted and involved in decision-making. While the positions espoused across the political spectrum are encouraging in their new commitments and ambitions for the British public, a clear strategy is needed to ensure that education and skills development are indeed for all. Regardless of which party triumphs in the next General Election, the message is clear, more attention is required to develop a clear lifelong learning strategy that allows for the development of all, and from early years learning, up until the seniors in our society.

Recommendations

1. Introduce concrete measures to address the needs of adult learners, laying out plans which are applicable for those already in professions, be they in early or mid-career stages.
2. Implement increased hours of free Government-funded childcare to allow more parents greater flexibility to work and also potentially take time to retrain.
3. Create a Growth and Skills Levy to drive new opportunities and the promotion of training programmes and upskilling, with future conversations to be had multilaterally, with learners, workers, and employers.
4. Invest in the training and the retention of teachers and in the provision of further support for students and staff to increase equal opportunities, regardless of social class and economic background.
5. Rebalance education policy competences between Holyrood, the Senedd and Westminster going forward.
6. Increase cooperation and lesson-learning between the four devolved nations on education, training and skills, so as to help address many shared issues.
7. Identify and evaluate measures to achieve high numeracy and literacy levels across society and help their development beyond early-years and pre-16 learning.
8. Increase parity of esteem between academic and technical education in avenues, beyond the new Advanced British Standard, which can benefit different types of learners and from all backgrounds.
9. Advance the importance of technical and vocational skills in the development of new opportunities for young people when they leave school, further or higher education and they enter the working world.
10. Involve learners in decision-making processes to ensure that strategies for education and skills development are indeed for all, from early years to the seniors in our society.

About the Lifelong Education Institute

The **Lifelong Education Institute** (LEI) exists to promote learning and skills training for people at all ages and stages of their lives and careers. We believe that education should be available and accessible to everyone whenever and wherever they need it. Whether they are school leavers or university graduates, new recruits or long-serving employees, recent arrivals or long-term residents, working people or those who have entered retirement.

Our approach is based on four principles:

- Putting the lifelong learner first
- Building an integrated tertiary education system
- Bringing stakeholders together
- Looking to the four nations of the UK and beyond

Together, these principles underpin every part of our work, from research to advocacy, from convening to commentary. They are the bedrock on which we must build the 21st-century education system that the UK's learners urgently deserve.

The Lifelong Education Institute's Secretariat is hosted by the thinktank ResPublica. The Institute gets its strategic direction from its Advisory Board, which comprises prominent and forward-thinking figures in education and skills space. In addition, the Institute has asked political figures to form a Board of Patrons, who will advise on the current political environment, and help by progressing the Institute's positions in Whitehall.

Education and Skills: Across the Political Landscape

The Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens, the Scottish National Party (SNP), and Plaid Cymru are the six main political parties in the UK, representing millions of citizens.

In this thinkpiece, the Lifelong Education Institute explores how the subjects of education and skills were discussed at these parties' conferences in September and October 2023. It evaluates the diverse policy positions espoused across the political landscape and considers their principal areas of focus and consideration. It concludes with key reflections on the main areas of consensus across the parties in opposition, and how the issues discussed by these politicians look set to shape future advances in UK lifelong learning policy.



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