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## Conference call

**The party conferences gave an interesting idea as to how education manifestos might look in the run-up to May 2015. Sunniva Davies-Rommetveit unpicks the policies**

Three apt descriptions of the main parties' education stances during Party Conference Season 2014 would be that they were conciliatory, accusatory and apologetic. It's not too difficult to figure out which party fits which category, either.

In the blue corner it was all about spreading the love. Nicky Morgan's nonstop praise of teachers' hard work shows the education secretary's determination to build bridges with teachers, after the rifts caused by her predecessor. In the red corner, shadow education secretary Tristram Hunt decided to go on the offensive, accusing the Tories of supporting "rising class sizes, more unqualified teachers, [and] tripling tuition fees".

A remorseful Nick Clegg, meanwhile, took it upon himself a week before the Liberal Democrat party conference to apologise (again) for making "a promise that we weren't absolutely sure we could deliver" on raising tuition fees. Whether it'll make much difference to alienated former Lib Dem voters is another matter, though.

But despite the differing tones, many of the themes covered were similar. All the main parties (and no, despite its support in the polls, UKIP does not qualify) spoke about childcare; meliorating teacher quality; academies; and vocational training. So what did party conference season tell us about the parties' upcoming manifestos, and what does it mean for the sector at large?

### Childcare

Free childcare is often seen as a 'soft' policy which will gain hard-working parents' votes, and all three parties spoke about broadening its scope. While Labour and the Liberal Democrats respectively promised "massive" increases, the Tories championed their new 'Tax free childcare' initiative, which is to launch in autumn next year provided the Conservatives remain in government.

Jonathan Simons, head of education at the think tank Policy Exchange, says the policy could be improved. Instead of tax-free childcare being made available for those earning up to £150,000 a year, the threshold should be lowered to £60,000 instead.

"There are not many people earning £150,000 who are not in the labour market because of childcare cost reasons. Lowering the offer to £60,000 frees up around £240 million a year to improve the quality of childcare provision more generally."

This money, he says, could be used to bring up the quality of nurseries in less well-off areas. Here, there are often not enough eligible free childcare places available, due to nurseries being unable to get an Ofsted rating of outstanding, good or satisfactory.

"Nursery quality provision correlates very strongly with the overall wealth of an area. If you look in poorer areas, far fewer providers will have these higher ratings; and you're only allowed to offer free places when you're rated satisfactory or better."

Some, moreover, have pointed to this new policy disadvantaging families with fewer children (as the tax break is per child), as well as those with one stay-at-home parent. They also question whether it is going to prove as popular as the current voucher scheme, which can offer better incentives for some, and which the government plans to phase out.

When it comes to the Liberal Democrats' and Labour's more ambitious policies, it is questionable where the



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extra money to extend free childcare so extensively will come from. For nursery providers, over 80% of which are either for profit or part of the third sector, all three stances will largely be welcome; encouraging free and increasingly subsidised childcare will mean more parents will be able to afford it.

### Vocational training

For Connor Ryan, director of research & communications at the Sutton Trust, it was positive that all three parties spoke of increasing vocational training. Labour's "fourth national goal" to have as many young people taking an apprenticeship as choosing to go to university by 2025 was, he says, "largely in line with our stance on it".

David Cameron's pledge to increase apprenticeships by three million over the next parliament was slightly less clear, though. Ryan, for instance, says that more detail is needed on whether these would be at level two or the higher quality three; and whether they would be for adults or young people. "We need to see a breakdown of these figures."

More generally, all parties should ensure they see true on increasing vocational training if they win in 2015. With the rise in tuition fees, many see paid apprenticeships as a good alternative to university. Yet, there have been questions over whether both Labour and the Conservative's pledges will uphold the quality of training.

"Both parties need to be careful about chasing targets and inflicting legislative mandates on employers to help meet them," Stewart Segal, chief of the Association of Employment & Learning Providers, told *the Guardian* in October.

"Labour has proposed that winning government contracts should be tied to offering apprenticeships. While this is a nice idea in the sense that it encourages a more positive approach in companies to training staff, it's not something that should be used as a quota. As we have seen in the past, such measures have put the quality of provision in jeopardy."

However, the fact that vocational training is receiving more publicity from politicians is in itself a positive step. The Sutton Trust conducted a poll asking what teachers, students and parents thought of apprenticeships. This highlighted the need for a change in perspective on apprenticeships: "Many students and parents are open to the idea, provided they are at level three," Ryan explains. "But a common student complaint was that teachers did not know enough about them, or even rubbished them in some cases. Hopefully in the next five years, apprenticeships will have more of a status in the UK."

### Schools

In an interesting admission – or U-turn as some have described it – Morgan moved to rule out state schools being for profit a few days ahead of the party conferences. It followed controversial comments to the Times Educational Supplement in September that "[for profit] is something I'm happy to have lots of further advice and emails on".

Her clarified position is welcome, Simons says: "We've got a flourishing not-for-profit sector in this country in terms of academy sponsors and chains so there's no need for them to be run for-profit."

The only mention in Morgan's speech about private schools was to commend the fact that private and state schools were increasingly "working together to drive up standards".

Unsurprisingly, more of Morgan's focus has been on winning back teachers' confidence – a clear effort to ease the rifts created by Michael Gove. She called them "dedicated and inspiring", and ended her speech by asking her party to show "every school that we are on their side, that everything we have done has been driven by the desire to raise standards for all pupils in all schools".

But while Morgan seemed earnest when talking about reducing teachers' workloads, she failed to explain how it would be achieved beyond holding talks with teachers and unions. Her approach feels rather woolly and begs the question, come May 2015, will she be able to convince large numbers of voters that she truly is a break with the past?

Interestingly, the Tories' academy and free school programmes – or for that matter the damaging Trojan Horse scandal – were absent from both Hunt's and Miliband's party speeches. Hunt only mentioned Labour's own Sponsored Academies programme to turn around failing schools, perhaps to remind voters that the academy concept – while intended for quite different purposes – was initially its own.

Hunt did go on the warpath about the treatment of teachers, though, arguing: "The Tories think teachers are the 'enemies of promise'. We think great teaching is the surest route to social mobility."

But Simons feels that Labour has so far been susceptible to its critics because its policies have not been presented as one, comprehensive package. "I think Labour should have put out a shadow white paper this summer linking their policies on teacher quality together."

He also argues that Labour risks alienating teachers, with plans such as having a 'world-class teacher' in every classroom, greater continued professional development and renewed teacher licenses every few years. Critics have described the policies as "micro-managing" and "gimmicky". "Teachers do not want another overhaul, and they don't want to be told that what they're doing is not good enough," Simons explains.

### University tuition fees

Clegg's apology on tuition fees, though bold, was also dangerous. "They're in a very weak position going into this election, largely because of tuition fees," says Stuart Rennie, an international education consultant.

Labour, by contrast, decried both opposition parties for their "shameful" tripling of tuition fees. Still, there was no mention of its previous proposal to cut HE fees to £6,000, perhaps because there is disagreement within the party about whether or not to lead with a policy that they might be unable to implement.

Trying to make policy about higher education fees when in opposition is difficult without access to the books, of course. Mark Leach, director of the think tank Wonkhe, says: "Promising £6,000 fees could tie Labour's hands behind their back if they win the general election next year. Ed Balls has made it clear that Labour will inherit the coalition's spending plans for 2015-16, so it will be difficult to find the extra money to reduce fees to £6,000 a year in that period."

For Rennie, tuition fees will set the tone for higher education in the run up to May 2015, along with the still controversial student visa regulations. The coalition's policies still cost universities dear, but there is some good news. UKIP has ironically said it will support removing non-EU students from the net migration cap

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(although it would also increase fees for EU students to the same level as non-EU ones). That leaves the Tories as the only party going into the election opposing the idea. In political terms, that makes a further lurch rightwards by the Tories on student visa policy unlikely, and most universities will be thankful for that.

### What the parties promised...

#### Conservatives

- Tax free childcare – for every 80 pence paid in, parents receive a 20 pence top up. To qualify, parents will have to be in work, earning just over an average of £50 a week and not more than £150,000 per year
- Cap benefits further to fund three million apprenticeships
- Reduce teachers' workloads.

#### Liberal Democrats

- Provide 15 hours of free childcare for all two-year-olds in England by 2020
- Increase number of apprenticeships as part of their 'Million Jobs Campaign' - proposing a £1 an hour increase in the minimum wage for all first year apprentices. They want a big expansion in degree level "advanced" apprenticeships.

#### Labour

- Increase free childcare from 15 hours per week to 25 hours per week for the three and four year olds of working parents.
- By 2025, ensure as many young school or college leavers take an apprenticeship as currently go to university.
- Level three apprenticeships should be basic level
- Have a world-class teacher in every classroom
- Improve continuing professional development
- Renew teacher licenses every few years to improve quality
- Re-establish School Support Staff Negotiating Body to represent cleaners, janitors, dinner ladies, teaching assistants.



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