

Social Policies and Distributional Outcomes

in a Changing Britain

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The Conservatives' Record on Compulsory Education in England, May 2015 to pre-COVID 2020

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The Conservative government elected in 2015 aimed to raise educational standards and complete the transformation to an autonomous school system initiated by its predecessor. It set out ambitions for greater social mobility through education. We found that:

- Total spending on schools remained broadly stable but pupil numbers grew, so per-pupil funding declined. Post-16 spending declined more. Funding for pupils with special educational needs could not keep up with demand.
- The system came under increasing strain, with rising pupil-teacher ratios, and unmet need for investment in school buildings.
- Although, according to Ofsted judgement, the quality of schools overall improved slightly, there are doubts about reliability of such data, and a large socio-economic gradient remained.
- 'T' levels were introduced, but apprenticeship starts declined by more than a fifth. University Technical Colleges struggled.
- 'Standards' also increased slightly, but there was no real narrowing in disadvantage gaps. Disadvantaged young people became less likely to achieve Level 2 by age 19.
- Particularly worrying trends for attainment among some ethnic groups and young people with additional needs
- There was increasing evidence of exclusion and marginalisation of more vulnerable students.

By the end of 2019, political consensus on education had been lost, with opposition parties arguing for broader curriculum, fewer tests and a less competitive and more inclusive system. The COVID-19 crisis which pitched children out of schools and examinations has further added to the sense that a new 'great debate' on education is now needed.

What were the Conservatives' aims and goals?

The Conservative agenda for this period, set out in the 2015 election manifesto, was essentially one of continuity: extending and embedding the wide-ranging changes started under the Coalition. The same themes of higher standards, discipline and rigour, combined with parental choice and school autonomy, were very much in evidence in a manifesto that pledged to drive up school standards, protect school funding and make it fairer, turn failing and 'coasting' schools into academies, provide more free schools, 'back teachers' over discipline and lead the world in maths and science. Issues with teacher recruitment and retention were recognised in commitments to a range of initiatives on workload, pay and professional development. The Pupil Premium was to be retained to provide extra funding to schools so that children from poorer backgrounds could have the chance to fulfil their potential. In the post-16 phase, qualifications reform was to continue with more reductions in lower level vocational courses, replacing these with high quality apprenticeships, with further commitments to technical education through the expansion of the programme of University Technical Colleges.

For a short period in 2016 and 2017, while Justine Greening was Secretary of State, social mobility was at the centre of departmental plans, with a stronger focus on addressing disadvantage gaps, expanding high quality post-16 choices, improving careers advice and guidance and supporting school improvement in the most 'challenging' areas. Post-Greening, Conservative education plans for 2018, 2019 and beyond adopted the more familiar focus on the continuing reform of the school system to create 'more great schools', teacher recruitment and retention, and improving technical education, although 'equality of opportunity' and a 'a fair chance' for every child were at the heart of the education sections of Boris Johnson's 2019 manifesto. After the major shake-up of the education system under Michael Gove from 2010 to 2015, this was essentially a period of implementation and roll-out, rather than of new policy development.

What did the Conservatives do?

School and College System Reform

The programme of 'Academisation' of England's state school system continued. The 2016 Education and Adoptions Act gave new powers to intervene in 'failing' schools and brought 'coasting' schools under scope for intervention. New free schools continued to be set up, now as the main way to meet demand for new school places. By 2019, 75% of secondary schools and 32% of primaries were Academies (up from 57% and 11% in 2014). At the same time, various structures and programmes were introduced to strengthen the management of an increasingly fragmented system and to fill in some of the gaps and inconsistencies that had emerged as schools operated increasingly autonomously. These included

strengthening the role of Regional Schools Commissioners, a new Strategic School Improvement Fund, and a network of maths and English Hubs and a new Careers Strategy. 37 'area reviews' were undertaken to rationalise post-16 provision, including providing the opportunity for sixth form colleges (SFCs) to become Academies. As a result, the number of further education colleges was reduced by around a fifth and SFCs by two-fifths.

Funding Reform

A new 'national funding formula' for schools – designed to be simpler and fairer – was implemented from April 2018, albeit with a transition period until 2021 which means that its full effects cannot yet be seen. Funding reform also took place in the post-16 phase. The Education Funding Agency (EFA) and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) were merged, bringing all post-16 funding under one umbrella, and the system for funding apprenticeships was also overhauled with the introduction of an employer levy.

Curriculum, Assessment and Accountability

Children and young people in this period experienced multiple changes to curriculum content and examinations – for example new Key Stage 2 SATS in 2016, and new GCSEs, AS and A levels. However, these were changes instigated by previous reforms. The main new additions in the school system were new accountability measures which raised the bar and focused more narrowly: 'progress 8'; a new headline measure just of English and maths; and an uprating of the definition of a good pass at GCSE from grade 4 or grade 5. The post-16 system saw continued reduction in numbers of vocational qualifications, and the introduction of 'T' levels: technical equivalents to 'A' levels.

Teacher Recruitment, Retention and Development

Growing concerns about teacher supply shortages were met by various specific programmes and incentives and in 2019 by a new Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy, including a new Early Career Framework. Teacher pay also saw two above average uplifts in 2018 and 2019, although the School Teachers' Review Body thought these insufficient to tackle a worsening recruitment and retention situation. A multi-pronged action plan to reduce teacher workload was initiated from 2016.

Inequalities and Distribution

The Conservatives primarily articulated their goals in respect of educational inequalities in terms of a commitment to equality of opportunity, to be achieved by raising the standard of education across the board along with the Pupil Premium to help schools raise attainment for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. 12 'Opportunity Areas' were established in 'social mobility coldspots'. A new vision for alternative provision (AP) was set out, along with £4 million Alternative Provision Innovation Fund and a new wave of commissioning free school provision. Major reforms to the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system, introduced in 2014, were implemented in this period, topped up from 2018 with

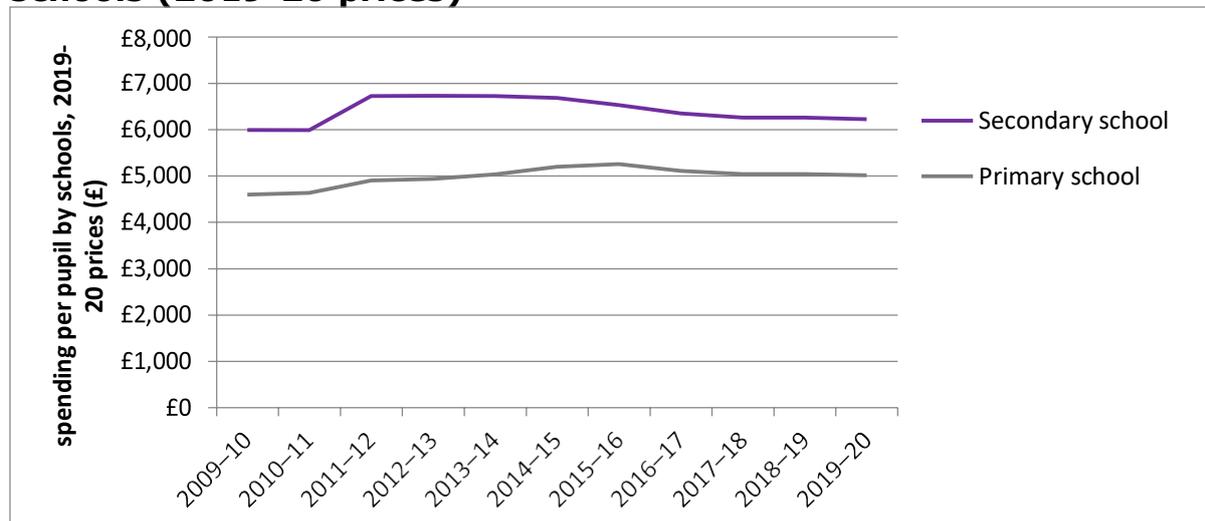
expanded provision, and new SEND training hubs. In the face of increasing evidence that the system was both failing and financially unsustainable, a wider-ranging review was announced in 2019. Action on other axes of inequality (gender and ethnicity) did not figure prominently in the 2015-2019 period.

How much did the Conservatives spend?

School spending, which had been relatively protected in the Coalition's spending cuts from 2010 to 2015, became a major point of public debate during this period, leading to pledges from all major parties to increase it, at the 2019 election.

There was virtually no change in real terms expenditure on under 16s school education between 2014-15 and 2018-19, and the rise in pupil numbers meant that per pupil spending fell over the same period (Figure 1). In September 2019, the government pledged an additional £4.3bn, sufficient to reverse the decline since 2010, but only just. Capital spending on schools remained broadly constant in this period (around £5.1bn in each year), but with an increasing share going to the building of new (Free) schools.

Figure 1 Spending by schools per pupil in primary and secondary schools (2019-20 prices)



Source: Figure reproduced from Figure 3.2 in Britton et al. (2019)

Spending on post-16 education had been falling pre-2015 while school funding was protected, and fell further between 2014-15 and 2018-19 - from £4.26bn to £3.70bn in further education and sixth form colleges (a 13% fall), and from £2.47bn to £2.03bn in school sixth forms (18%). Despite declining student numbers, this led to a fall in per-student funding, particularly sharp for sixth forms (from £5,408 per head to £4,993, compared with a drop from £6,138 to £5,870 for FE colleges) An additional

£400m was pledged in September 2019, - an amount insufficient to keep up with the anticipated rise in student numbers.

What happened as a result?

A System Under Strain

With rising pupil numbers, rising needs and static (schools) or falling (post-16) spending, the system came under increasing strain. The teacher supply situation deteriorated slightly, with a slight fall in teacher numbers, and a rise in pupil:teacher ratios. In secondary schools the ratio of pupils to teachers rose from 15.0 in 2014 to 16.3 in 2018, and in primary from 20.3 to 20.9. The number of teacher vacancies also rose.

Evidence on teacher workload is mixed, with the government's own survey reporting a reduction in workload, but an OECD survey showing an increase. Both show a continuing problem, with high workloads by international comparison. Nearly 90% of secondary teachers in the government's Teacher Workload Survey reported that workload was a problem in their schools. Despite a focus on discipline, the proportion of teachers believing there is a widespread behaviour problem in their schools rose from 37% to 56%, according to an NASUWT survey.

The government's apprenticeship reforms failed to increase the opportunities available. In fact, they had the opposite effect. Apprenticeship starts for under 19s fell by 22% from 125,851 in 2014/15 to 97,697 in 2018/19 overall. And the new special educational needs system introduced by the Coalition ran into increasing trouble, with long waiting lists for assessment, serious gaps in therapy provision, and too few high needs places. The National Audit Office (NAO) declared the system financially unsustainable.

Meanwhile, given the ageing of the school estate and relatively low capital spending in the last decade, NAO also estimated a need for increased capital spending of c £13bn to bring school buildings up to a satisfactory or good standard.

Slight Improvements in Quality and Outcomes Overall

One of the government's key claims to success was an improvement in the quality of schools. In 2015, 82% of schools were deemed good/outstanding, increasing to 86% by 2019, but also a slight increase in the proportion of schools judged inadequate from 3% to 4%. However, there are reasons to be circumspect in drawing implications from this data due to changes in the inspection framework but also due to reduced frequency of inspections for some schools. New Free Schools seemed to match the overall profile of quality in the existing system but there were problems with quality and (sustainability) for University Technical Colleges and alternative provision.

Multiple changes to assessment and measures make it hard to establish trends in educational outcomes. In most cases, only the period from 2016 is comparable. Results showed slight improvement on most measures, particularly at the end of primary school and particularly in maths. In the OECD's PISA tests of 15 year olds, England's average maths score also increased between 2015 and 2018.

Persistent Inequalities and a Worsening Situation for the Most Vulnerable
Beneath these overall trends, very little impact was made on reducing inequalities - in spending, access, experiences or outcomes- and there was increasing evidence of things getting worse for the some of the most vulnerable children and young people.

On attainment gaps, the disadvantage gap measured in months of learning at the end of primary school changed very little since 2015, according to EPI's measure, and there are worrying signs of its worsening in 2019. DfE's analysis shows an improvement, albeit very modest, between 2016 and 2019 in the proportion of 'disadvantaged' pupils achieving the expected level relative to all others. At age 16, progress stalled and on some measures the gap increased. At 19, there was an overall decrease in the proportion of young people achieving Level 2, principally due to a worsening of the situation for young people eligible for Free School Meals, from disadvantaged areas, and with special education needs. Since 2015 there has been a 25% increase in FSM-eligible young people leaving education at age 19 without having achieved Level 2.

Exclusions from school rose, after being on a steady downward trend. In state-funded secondary schools, the rate of fixed period exclusion rose from 6.6% of the school population in 2013/14 to 10.1% in 2017/18. Permanent exclusions rose from 0.06% of the school population to 0.10% The increase in exclusions has been disproportionately experienced by more disadvantaged groups. There were increasing concerns about schools 'off-rolling' students who would not contribute well to league tables, and the number of home-educated children doubled, with one-fifth of these having special educational needs.

The system itself also showed signs of becoming more unequal, not just in relation to exclusions and additional needs, but more broadly. The pronounced gradient in school quality got slightly steeper as the proportion of the children attending good/outstanding schools increased slightly more in the least deprived areas compared to most deprived, and the new national funding formula is expected to distribute money away from schools with the highest levels of disadvantage. These trends do not inspire confidence that the system is becoming any better equipped to equalise opportunities or increase social mobility.

Conclusions and Policy Challenges Looking Forward

Education on the Eve of the Pandemic

The Conservative government elected in 2015 essentially pursued policies of continuity, bedding down and extending the major reforms initiated in 2010 by the Coalition government. These efforts resulted in, at best, a modest improvement in standards and quality. However, as pupil numbers and needs rose, while funding was static or (in the post-16 phase) falling, the system was increasingly under strain, evidenced in teacher shortages, rising pupil-teacher ratios and difficulties meeting additional needs. There was no real evidence that the efforts put into remodelling the system were substantially improving it.

Moreover, despite a rhetoric of social mobility, little if any impact had been made on inequalities and in fact there was increasing evidence of the most vulnerable children and young people missing out in a system geared to increasing performance and competition. The new funding formula seemed to signal a shift of resources away from areas of highest need, offsetting to some extent the redistributive effect of the Pupil Premium, while reforms in the post-16 phase mainly focused on higher attainers who could go on to the technical equivalent of 'A' Levels, leaving huge challenges for lower attainers.

Future Policy Challenges

This left the new government elected in December 2019 with many of the same challenges that its predecessor had faced, including, but not limited to:

- Continuing to address quality and accountability issues in the autonomous school system.
- Tackling failures in system reform: particularly the SEND system and University Technical Colleges.
- Teacher retention and recruitment.
- High and sustained disadvantage gaps
- Particularly acute problems in some ethnic groups, and for young people with additional needs
- Growing problems with the quality of the school estate, given limited capital investment in recent years.
- Successful post-16 transition for young people with lower GCSE attainment who will not be able to access T-levels immediately, including creating many more high quality apprenticeships.

Perhaps more importantly, it was evident that after nine years of Conservative reform, political consensus on education had been lost. While the 2019 Conservative manifesto stuck to the current agenda, opposition

parties argued for broader curriculum, fewer tests and a less competitive and more inclusive system.

COVID-19 Challenges and Opportunities

The COVID-19 crisis presents both short and longer term challenges to the education system. In the short term these have included the shift to online learning; keeping schools open for the children of key workers; and re-opening them safely for all young people, as well as the key issue of qualifications and transitions in the absence of examinations. The distributional effects of the 2020 no-exam year remain to be seen. Longer term, the education system will resume not just facing the issue of how to remedy 'lost learning' and the inequalities therein, but needing to respond to the economic, social and emotional impacts of the crisis. The economic fallout will also present wider threats to ongoing government spending, as well as the challenge of responding to increasing hardship and inequalities in family circumstances. This will test a system currently making little progress with addressing disadvantage gaps and moving in the direction of increasing exclusion and marginalisation of some of the most vulnerable learners, with a less progressive funding formula.

However, the pandemic may also have broader policy effects, including re-thinking of how education can (and cannot) be supported at home through technological solutions; highlighting inequality, vulnerability and support needs; and possibly causing some re-valuing of teachers and other education and care professionals. On the other hand, history suggests it may help with teacher recruitment and retention as the appeal of secure employment is increased. Most fundamentally, in creating a temporary 'test-free zone', COVID-19 may lead to resolution, one way or another, of the debate about whether all of England's extensive testing apparatus is really needed and justified given its social and educational costs. The need for a new 'great debate' about what education is for, and how it should be organised, was already beginning to be signalled. COVID-19 may well be the trigger for this debate finally to happen.

Further information

The full version of this paper available at
<http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spdo/spdorp06.pdf>

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