

Session 3.

The education policy and reform agenda of the UK Labour Government (2024-present)

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October 2026



Session objectives

By the end of this session participants should be able to understand:

- the educational challenges inherited by Labour in 2024
- Labour's emerging approach to schools, skills and lifelong learning
- Labour's reforms compared with the Conservative reforms after 2010
- Whether Labour is adapting or transforming the Anglo-Saxon model
- UK and Chinese educational development strategies
- Future directions for UK education policy after 2028/29.

Section 1.

Labour Government in 2024 – the inheritance

Labour's political context (2024-2026)

Labour's first phase (2024-25): Centrist social democracy and fiscal discipline

- Led by Keir Starmer after 14 years of Conservative government
- Priority on economic stability, fiscal discipline and rebuilding public trust
- Moderate, centrist and managerial approach
- Reform within existing institutional constraints
- Focus on growth, competence and public service improvement

Labour's second phase (2025-26): Emerging civic social democracy

- Led by Andy Burnham (September 2026 to present)
- Greater emphasis on active government and long-term national renewal
- Industrial strategy, infrastructure and regional development
- Strong focus on skills, vocational education and lifelong learning
- Growing role for partnerships between state, employers, local government and civil society
- More ambitious developmental state agenda

Introduction: A new government, a new educational settlement?

Core question

- Labour inherited a highly marketised and fragmented education system.
- The Government seeks to link education to economic growth, social mobility and national renewal.
- Skills, industrial strategy and opportunity are central themes.
- But how far do current reforms represent systemic change?

Framing question

Is Labour building a new model of education or renewing the existing Anglo-Saxon settlement?

The inherited Anglo-Saxon model (2024)

Key features

- Market competition between institutions
- Strong accountability and performance measures
- Employer-led but voluntary skills system
- High-status universities and lower-status vocational routes
- Fragmented governance and weak coordination
- Limited lifelong learning participation

Key problem

Persistent educational inequality alongside economic stagnation and skills shortages.

Section 3.
***Labour's education policies –
focus on post-16 skills***

Labour's education policy (2024-26)

2024 Labour Manifesto

- Opportunity, growth and social mobility
- Reform of the Apprenticeship Levy
- Stronger links between education, skills and economic strategy

Skills England Reports (2024-26)

- Identification of priority skill shortages
- Alignment of skills policy with industrial strategy
- Greater coordination between employers, providers and government [\[](#)

Plan for Change (2025)

- Skills and growth as central government missions
- Increased focus on productivity, opportunity and workforce development

Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025)

- Strengthened role for further education colleges
- Integration of skills and employment policy
- Technical Excellence Colleges
- Lifelong learning and workforce retraining
- Stronger regional and local skills planning

Labour's educational priorities

Emerging themes

- Growth and productivity
- Opportunity and inclusion
- Skills for industrial strategy
- Regional development
- Greater coordination across education sectors
- Education as a public good and economic asset

Shift

From market efficiency alone towards economic and social missions.

Curriculum and school reform

Potential changes

- Broader curriculum review (Prof. Becky Francis review 2024-26)
- Inclusion and participation
- Digital and AI literacy
- Greater emphasis on creativity and citizenship
- Reducing barriers for disadvantaged learners

Debate

Incremental reform or a rethinking of educational purposes?

Social mobility and educational opportunity

Labour's approach

Key elements

- Breaking down barriers to opportunity
- Focus on disadvantaged communities
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Attendance and engagement
- Early years investment

Continuity and change

- Similar commitment to attainment
- Greater emphasis on equity and inclusion

Skills England and the skills system – Labour's flagship reform

- Establishment of Skills England
- Closer relationship between skills and industrial strategy
- National coordination of workforce development
- Attempt to overcome fragmented governance

Significance

Potential move from market coordination to strategic coordination.

Reforming vocational education

Labour proposals

- Growth and Skills Levy
- Foundation Apprenticeships
- Retention of valued qualifications
- Stronger role for FE colleges
- Expansion of Institutes of Technology

Key question

How much do these reforms alter the underlying structure of the system?

Lifelong learning returns?

Emerging developments

- Recognition of workforce retraining needs
- AI and technological disruption
- Green transition
- Adult skills shortages
- Local growth agendas

Critical issue

Can lifelong learning become a central policy objective again after years of decline?

Conservatives (2010) and Labour (2024) compared

2010 Conservative (Gove) reforms	2024-26 Labour reforms
Schools first	Skills first
Curriculum transformation	Curriculum review
Structural reform	Institutional continuity
Clear theory of knowledge	Broader opportunity agenda
New settlement	Incremental adaptation

Labour's position - keep most of the Gove curriculum settlement, make it more inclusive and relevant, and focus political energy elsewhere, particularly on skills, further education and economic growth.

Section 4.

UK and China expenditure compared

'Follow the money'

UK

Year	Approx. education expenditure (£bn)	% GDP
2020-21	£110bn	4.9%
2021-22	£116bn	4.8%
2022-23	£120bn	4.5%
2023-24	£123bn	4.3%
2024-25	£124bn	4.2%
2025-26	£126bn	4.1%
2026-27 (planned)	£127bn	4.1%

Taking inflation into consideration – decrease of 10 per cent (2020-2016)

EU average 4.8 per cent of GDP

China

Year	Approx. education expenditure (RMB tn)	% GDP
2020	5.3tn	4.0%
2021	5.8tn	4.0%
2022	6.1tn	4.0%
2023	6.46tn	4.0%
2024	6.7tn*	4.0%*
2025	6.9tn*	4.0%*
2026	7.1tn*	4.0%*

Taking inflation into consideration – increase of 25 per cent (2020-2016)

China's GDP growth rate – about 5%

Section 5.
***Labour's reform programme –
where next?***

Labour and the Anglo-Saxon model

Areas of continuity

- Market economy remains dominant
- University-centred system remains intact
- Voluntary employer engagement
- Performance accountability retained

Areas of change

- More strategic coordination
- Stronger state role
- Greater regional devolution
- Enhanced role for FE and skills policy

Interpretation

Labour appears to be modifying rather than abandoning the Anglo-Saxon model.

Views of education unions and civil society organisations

Organisation	Broad assessment
Education unions	Unions have prioritised improvements in resources and working conditions over a broader challenge to the inherited architecture
Royal Society of Arts	Welcomes opportunity and skills agenda but seeks a broader vision of learning and capability.
Edge Foundation	Welcomes skills focus but argues vocational pathways and investment remain inadequate.
Learning and Work Institute	Strongly supports Skills England but calls for lifelong learning, stronger powers and higher investment.
Education Policy Institute	Welcomes reforms but argues Labour needs a more ambitious and coherent programme

Andy Burnham and the politics of devolution

Burnham's significance

- Advocate of devolution and local democracy
- Greater Manchester as a policy laboratory
- Integration of skills, employment and economic development
- Strong civic and regional orientation

Long-term significance

If Labour remains in government beyond 2028/29:

- More extensive devolution?
- A stronger regional state?
- Greater integration of education, skills and industrial policy?
- Movement towards a social-partnership model?

UK-China comparison – where next?

UK Labour	China
Reforming a market system	Reforming a state-led system
Greater coordination	Greater flexibility
Skills England	Central planning structures
Incremental reform	Strategic transformation

The future of UK education may depend on whether the country can develop a clearer long-term vision linking learning, skills, technology, citizenship and national development (and to spend more on education in real terms).

Overall assessment on Labour's reform programme

Unlike the Conservatives after 2010, Labour's educational reforms have attracted relatively broad support across unions, think tanks and civil society organisations.

The criticism is not that Labour is moving in the wrong direction, but that its reforms remain fragmented, under-resourced and insufficiently connected by a compelling educational narrative.

Final Question - Has Labour begun to create a new educational settlement, or is England still searching for the story that will define its next phase of educational development?