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Education under New Labour, 1997-2010

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Abstract

This article reviews the evidence on New Labour's educational achievements. It focuses on those aspects of policy that Labour itself highlighted in its manifestos, such as the raising of educational standards. A major issue, particularly on the issue of standards, is the methodological weaknesses of the statistics used. No firm conclusion can be drawn on whether standards rose or not: they probably merely kept pace with those in other countries. However Labour clearly put more resources into education than the previous Conservative administrations had done. There is also evidence of increased participation in post-compulsory (16-18) education, and Labour policies probably contributed towards this. There is also evidence of narrowing inequalities in achievement at the end of compulsory schooling. Conversely the introduction of fees for HE do not appear to have made inequalities worse. On balance then education represents a modest success for New Labour although the biggest story is really the over-claiming from both sides about their respective successes and failures and the poor quality and lack of commensurability over time of the statistical data.

Key words: Education. Standards. Inequalities. Methodology.

I. Introduction

Labour's 1997 manifesto famously declared that "Education will be our number one priority, and we will increase the share of national income spent on education as we decrease it on the bills of economic and social failure". This priority was reiterated in 2005.

Labour's diagnosis of the problem in 1997 was that "Nearly half of 11 year-olds in England and Wales fail to reach expected standards in English and maths. Britain has a smaller share of 17 and 18 year-olds in full-time education than any major industrial nation. Nearly two thirds of the British workforce lack vocational qualifications." The primary objective that New Labour set itself was therefore "to raise the standards of every school". And in 2010, at the conclusion of New Labour's thirteen years in power, Labour boasted in its manifesto that "In 1997, half of our secondary schools were below the basic minimum standard. Now, because of sustained investment and reform, it is just one in twelve, with standards rising fastest in disadvantaged areas. Nearly 100,000 more children each year leave primary school secure in reading, writing and maths. "

However, this claim was hotly challenged. Drawing on results from OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Conservative Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove claimed that "The PISA figures ... show that ... the standard of education ... offered to young people in this country declined relative to our international competitors. Literacy, down; numeracy, down; science, down: fail, fail, fail." (cited by Jerrim 2011.) A major focus of this review, therefore, must be to assess whether standards did rise or not. This is the yardstick by which New Labour would presumably wish to be judged.

In pursuit of this goal of raising standards, New Labour was almost hyperactive in introducing reforms and new initiatives. Table 1 shows a timeline of Labour's initiatives and legislation. Essentially, Labour used a multi-pronged approach to raising standards, some measures being rolled out universally (such as the literacy and numeracy strategies) while others were focussed on overcoming problems faced by disadvantaged individuals or areas (such as Sure Start). Academies and Trust schools were also designed to tackle problems of so-called failing schools in disadvantaged areas. Other policies aimed at 'driving up standards' were essentially continuations of previous Conservative policy, e.g. the emphasis on parental choice, testing children's performance, league tables, and giving schools more independence.

Aside from the focus on standards there were initiatives such as Educational Maintenance Allowances aimed at increasing participation rates in the upper secondary (16-18). There were also a series of reforms to the 14-18 curricula, particularly the introduction of vocational GCSEs and other vocational qualifications. These were intended to cater for the needs of the wider range of students whom Labour wished to keep in post-compulsory education. There was also a commitment to widening access in tertiary education, particularly at the most selective universities, to students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. In return for the right to charge higher fees, universities had to sign an agreement with the Office for Fair Access (established in 2004) specifying their widening participation strategy and benchmarks regarding type of school intake. While Labour never explicitly referred to social class inequalities in its manifestos, the subtext of many reforms was clearly to reduce inequalities by 'levelling up'.

Labour promised to increase spending overall, but also abolished the Assisted Places scheme, which subsidised places at private schools, in order to fund the promised primary class size cap of 30 places. Labour also notoriously introduced student fees in higher education. This was partly driven by the need to fund the expansion of HE participation. The New Labour critique of free higher education was that it was a ‘middle class subsidy’ because higher education is disproportionately enjoyed by middle-class children.

Table 1: Timeline of New Labour initiatives

1997	Schools White Paper ‘Excellence in Schools’	Promised to limit classes for 5-7 year olds to 30, encouraged ability setting in secondary schools.
	Education (Schools) Act	Abolished the Assisted Places Scheme.
	Targets for English and maths at KS2 (age 11), national numeracy and literacy strategies launched,	Specified literacy and numeracy hours with tightly prescribed content
1998	Schools Standards and Framework Act	Introduced specialist schools, limited infant class sizes, introduced Education Action Zones
	Sure Start launched	Programme intended to support families from pregnancy to age 4. Initial Sure Start areas were targeted according to area-level poverty.
	Teaching and Higher Education Act	Abolished student maintenance grants and introduced tuition fees
1999	Excellence in Cities strategy	Aimed to tackle underachievement in urban areas
	The Moser Report ‘A Fresh Start - improving literacy and numeracy’	Estimated that one in five adults are functionally illiterate, and a higher proportion innumerate. The Government responded by launching the <i>Skills for Life</i> strategy in 2001.
2000	First Academies announced	Academies are self-governing schools, directly funded by central government, and independent of local government.
2000	‘Curriculum 2000’ reform of A levels,	Designed to broaden choice at 16+, modularisation of A levels into AS and A2, with extensive scope for resits. Vocational A levels introduced.
2001	Key stage 3 strategy and GCSE targets.	Schools expected to set targets for improved attainment.
	Pupil learning credits scheme	Made extra funding available to secondary schools with high levels of Free School Meals eligibility in order to provide additional educational opportunities to pupils from deprived backgrounds.
	White paper ‘Schools: achieving	Proposed lesser role for LEAs, more

	success'	private sector involvement, greater school diversity and more diverse 14-19 curriculum.
2001	AimHigher: Excellence Challenge	Aimed to promote participation in FE and HE among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, for example through school links with colleges and universities.
2002	Education Act 2002 (implementing 2001 white paper)	Promoted creation of more faith schools, and more specialist schools, which would be allowed to select 10% of their pupils by 'aptitude'.
	Teach First founded	A scheme placing well-qualified graduates (with at least a 2:1 and BBB at A level) into deprived schools.
2003	Green Paper '14-19 Opportunity and Excellence',	Set out creation of a 14-19 phase
2004	Revised national curriculum	Only English, mathematics, science, ICT, physical education, citizenship and religious education compulsory at 14-16. Foreign languages dropped as national curriculum requirement.
2004	Education Maintenance Allowances rolled out (piloted 1999-2003)	A payment incentivising participation and attendance in further education for 16-19 year olds from poorer families.
2004	Tomlinson report '14-19 Curriculum and qualifications reform'	Recommended replacing GCSEs and A levels with a new single modular diploma at four levels.
2005	White paper 'Education and Skills'	Rejects Tomlinson, but introduced new vocational diplomas at levels 1-3
2005	White paper 'Higher Standards, Better Schools for All'	Proposed independent state schools backed by Trusts, LEAs to commission not provide school places, more parental choice.
2005	Education Act 2005	Measures related to school inspections and teacher training.
2006	Education and Inspections Act 2006:	Established Trust Schools
2006	Higher Education top-up fees introduced	Allowed differential fees of up to £3000
2008	Education and Skills Act 2008:	Raised the school leaving age to 17 from 2013 and to 18 from 2015

We organize this paper as follows. First, we briefly review the inputs such as funding and teacher numbers, under New Labour. Next we review the evidence on educational standards, drawing on the Labour government's own statistics. We then turn to external data such as the PISA international rankings, which critics have used to suggest that standards have actually plummeted. Third we examine participation rates at upper secondary and tertiary education, and fourth we explore whether levelling up actually occurred. In a final section we discuss whether any success (or failure) that we find can be attributed to the interventions that New Labour carried out.

It is worth reminding our readers at this point that the present article focuses on policies in England and that higher education fees are matters for the devolved administration with in particular Scotland having chosen a different fees regime. A number of the statistical sources do however include the UK as a whole.

2. Inputs – funding and teachers

New Labour certainly acted on its promises to prioritize education. At the start of their period in office, government spending on education as a percentage of GDP was below the OECD average, having fallen substantially since 1979 to 4.5% of GDP. It then grew, slowly at first, but eventually reached 6.2% in 2010/11, close to the OECD average (OECD 2012, table B2.1). The IFS has estimated that real expenditure increased by an average of 4.2% each year under Labour compared with an average increase of 1.5% under the 1979-1997 Conservative administrations, although in interpreting these figures one also needs to take account of the changing size of the school population, which had been declining since the mid-1970s (Chowdry and Sibieta 2011).

Chowdry and Sibieta estimated that the fastest growth under Labour was in capital spending on schools (12.9% p.a.). There were also major increases in further education spending (7.7% p.a.). Rates of increase were relatively high for under-5s spending (6.1% p.a.) and day-to-day secondary school spending (5.0% p.a.) while average growth in day-to-day primary school spending was slightly lower (3.9% p.a.). The lowest growth however was in higher education (2.3% p.a.). This reflects Labour's particular emphasis on early years education, where they had been convinced by the academic evidence that investments at this stage could be particularly productive.

The increases in spending translated into larger numbers of teachers and declining class sizes. The number of teachers increased by 12% over the period, from 400,000 to 450,000, but there were much bigger rises in numbers of support staff and of teaching assistants, whose numbers tripled to 190,000 in 2010. Since student numbers shrank slightly, this translated into declining pupil-teacher ratios. In primary schools the ratio fell from a peak in 1998 of almost 24:1 to under 22:1. They fell even more in nursery education (from around 19:1 to 16:1) but changed much less in secondary education (17:1 to 16:1) (ONS 2011, figure 6). In contrast there was no clear trend in higher education with the ratio remaining throughout at just over 16:1.

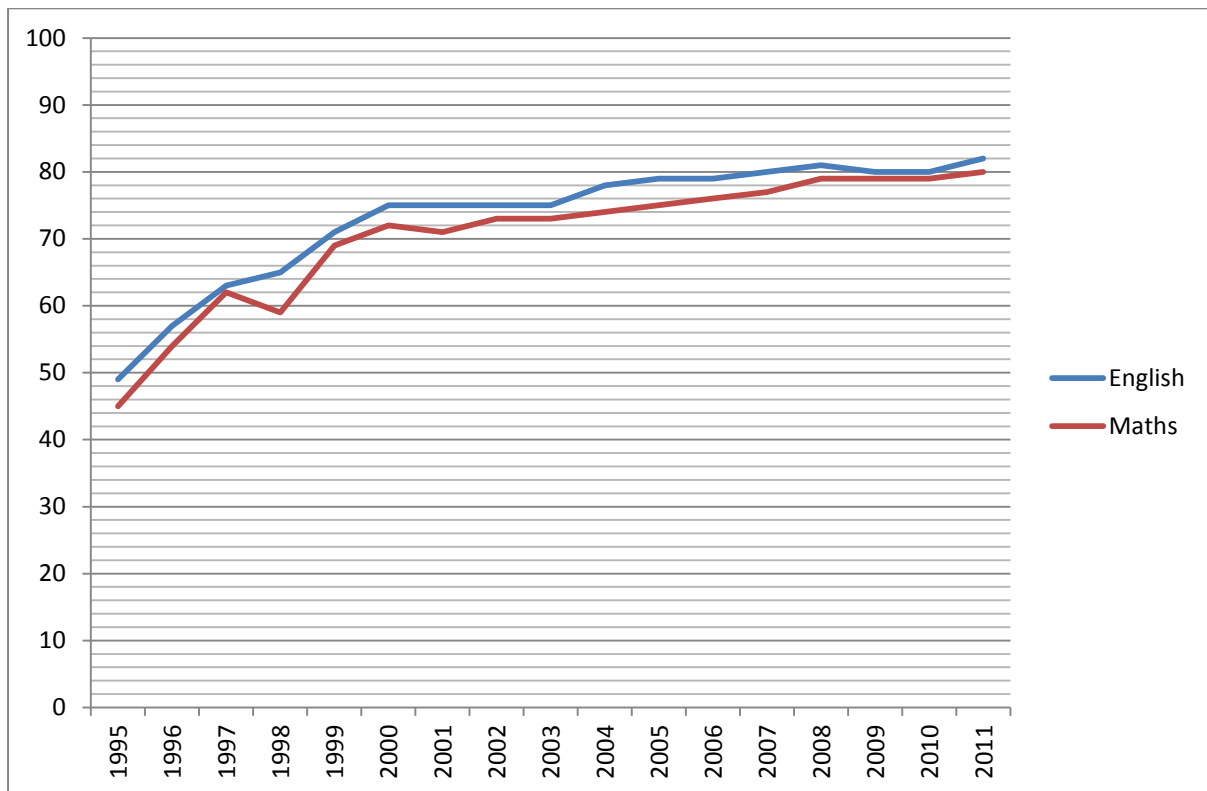
Increased financial resources and improved student:teacher ratios may not necessarily translate into improved educational performance. But at the very least, the evidence both from the increased resources and from the reforms indicated in Table 1 clearly demonstrate that Labour was serious about improving education.

3. Changes in educational standards – the Labour view

Official statistics covering the New Labour period are available for attainment at the end of primary school, at the end of compulsory schooling in the form of GCSE (and equivalents), and at the end of upper secondary schooling in the form of A levels (and equivalents). As we shall see, there are major methodological problems with these time series, but we need to start with them as they represent the evidence on which Labour based its optimistic assessment of its achievements.

Pupils in England take national Key Stage 2 (KS2) tests at the end of primary school, at age 11. Level 4 represents the level ‘expected’ of a pupil at this age. Figure 1 shows a steady and substantial climb in pupils achieving this level, starting prior to Labour taking power in 1997, and continuing less dramatically after 2000. By 2011, 80% of pupils had achieved the expected level in maths, and 82% in English. This was presumably the basis for Labour’s claim that “Nearly 100,000 more children each year leave primary school secure in reading, writing and maths”.

Figure 1: Key Stage 2 results 1995-2011, Percentage achieving level 4



Source: DfE: *National Curriculum Assessments at Key Stage 2 in England 2010/2011 (revised)* <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001047/index.shtml>

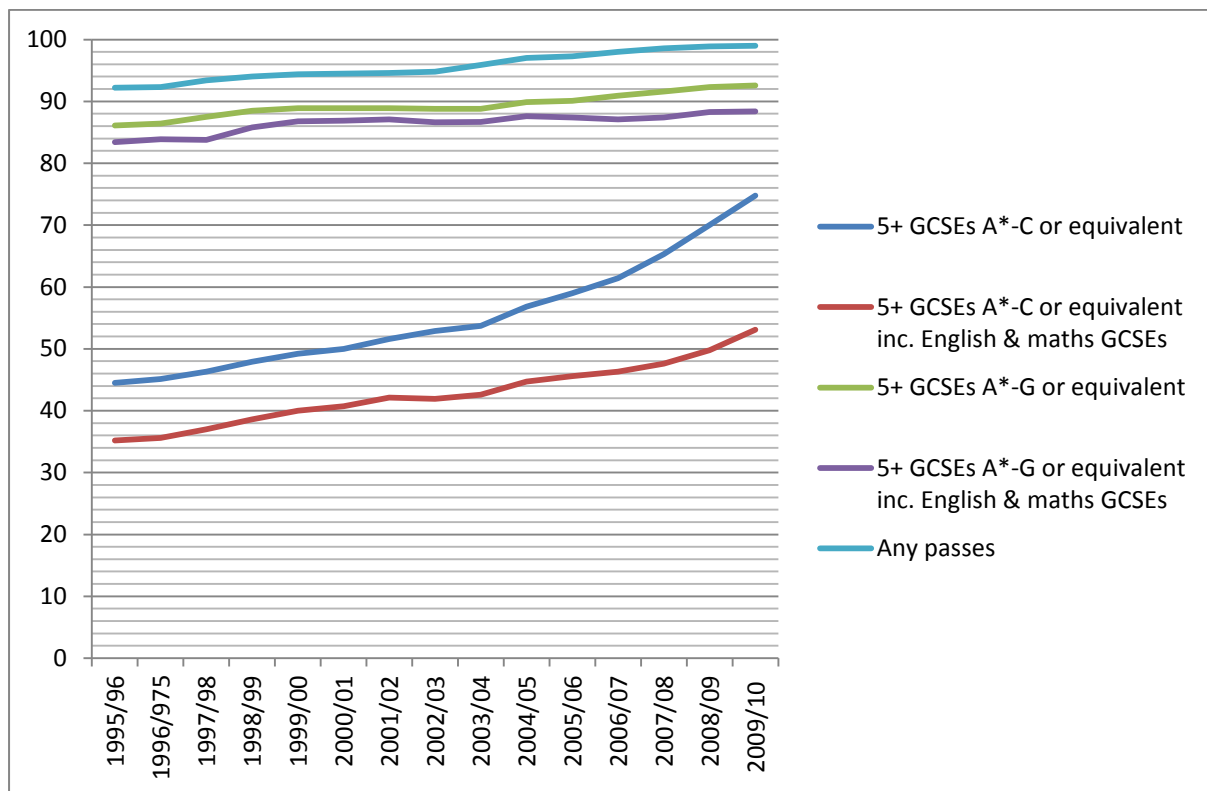
It is difficult to assess to what extent this dramatic improvement reflects real progress in pupils’ learning. The assessment standard may have changed over time, and improvements may simply reflect teaching to the test or other strategies to enhance notional performance. The essence of the problem is that test results were used for constructing school league tables and therefore introduced incentives for schools to find ways to present themselves in a

favourable light. Their use for league tables therefore potentially undermined their value as measures of real change in attainment.

Moreover, since Figure 1 shows that the improvement clearly antedates Labour's arrival in office, and since there is no acceleration in the rate of progress after 1997, we cannot attribute any progress (genuine or otherwise) solely to new Labour initiatives. More plausibly this apparent progress (and the unsurprising levelling out as the ceiling is approached) should be attributed to policies introduced by the previous Conservative administration and continued by Labour, such as testing, league tables and parental choice.

A rather different picture of trends over time is shown when we move on to GCSE results where we can see from Figure 2 that there was a substantial change in the rate of progress in achieving the benchmark of 5 good passes (ie passes at grades A* to C) at GCSE (or equivalent) in the second half of the period.

Figure 2: GCSE results 1996-2010, percentage achieving different benchmarks



Source: DfE: *GCSE and Equivalent Results in England, 2009/10*

<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000963/index.shtml>

Notes:

From 2003/04, 'any passes' includes attempts in entry level qualifications which do not contribute towards A*-C or A*-G thresholds.

Percentages from 1996/97 include GCSEs and GNVQs.

Percentages from 2003/04 include GCSEs and other equivalent qualifications approved for use pre-16.

In 2010 iGCSEs, accredited at time of publication, have been counted as GCSE equivalents and also as English & maths GCSEs.

The first point to notice is that the upsurge in the proportions obtaining five good passes starts from 2003/4. This does not fit well with the upsurge in KS2 test scores, which was most striking from 1995 to 2000 before levelling out. In other words, given the ages at which KS2

and GCSEs are typically taken, we might have expected to see an upsurge at GCSE from 2000-2005 and then a levelling off if the progress at KS2 had been real and sustained.

As with the statistics on KS2, there are a number of reasons to suspect that these gains at GCSE may not reflect real gains in learning. Arguably, the combination of the pressures of league tables with competition between examination boards for schools' custom made grade inflation likely. The period covered by this graph also saw some important changes in the way the figures were constructed. From 1997, GNVQs were included as 'GCSE equivalents'. From 2004, the figures include GCSEs and 'other equivalent qualifications approved for use pre-16'.

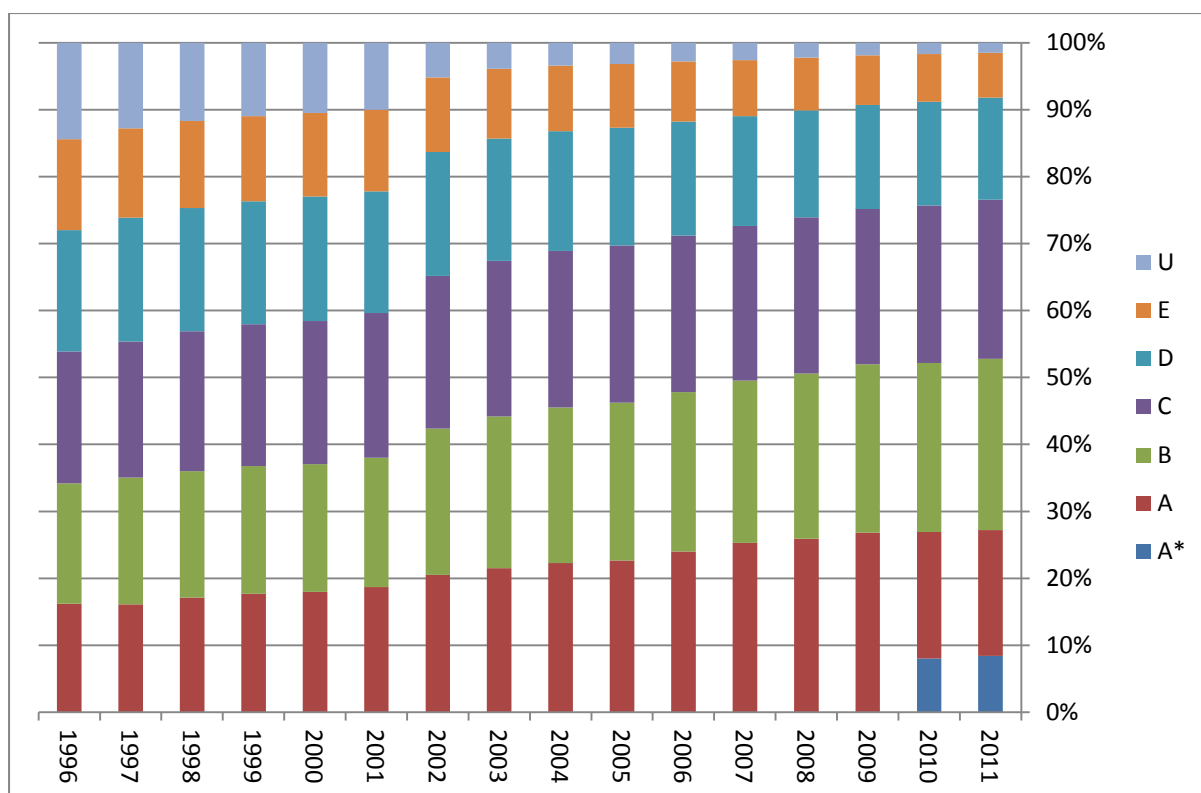
The central concern is whether these new vocational qualifications really are equivalent to GCSEs. Research suggests that they are not equivalent in terms of labour market rewards. The Wolf Report (2011) draws on evidence (Dearden, McGranahan and Sianesi 2004) showing that occupationally-specific level 2 vocation awards (NVQs), which in theory are 'equivalent' to GCSEs at grade A-C, in fact yield poor or even negative labour market returns. And we do not know of any research showing whether they are equivalent in terms of intellectual difficulty. One suspects that a degree of wishful thinking may be involved in the application of 'equivalence'.

This stretching of the definition of what counts as a GCSE pass for the purposes of the figures coincided with a distinct upturn in the gradient of progress on the 5 A*-C measure, especially for the measure that includes pupils who have not achieved good passes in maths and English. This figure increased from 53% in 2003 to 75% in 2009, while A*-C passes including maths and English rose from 42% to 53% over the same period. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the sharp increase in progress from 2004 onwards may simply be an artefact of the changes in what was being measured.

In addition, revisions to the National Curriculum in 2004 meant that only English, mathematics, science, ICT, physical education, citizenship and religious education were compulsory at 14-16. It seems likely that these changes also contributed to an artificial inflation of reported attainment post-2004. Foreign languages were dropped as a national curriculum requirement, leading to a dramatic decline in the take-up of these 'difficult' subjects. In contrast, religion GCSE entries soared, possibly due to the perceived easiness of the subject, but also because it was a compulsory subject for schools to teach, and, faced with the incentives of league tables, any curriculum time spent on non-exam subjects was seen as a wasted opportunity.

Somewhat similar issues are involved at A level.

Figure 3: A level Grades 1996-2011, percentages of different grades awarded



Source: 2010/11 Key Stage 5 Attainment Data (DfE)

Note: Entries rose from 620,164 in 1996 to 782,779 in 2011.

A level grades have risen steadily. In 1996, around a third of entries received at least a B grade, by 2011 this figure was over half. Ungraded entries have all but disappeared. In 2010, a new A* grade was introduced to allow universities to discriminate between the entries gaining A grades, which had reached over a quarter. Again, it is difficult to know to what extent these improved grades may reflect improved standards but it is striking that modularisation (introduced in 2000) was followed by a sharp increase in the rate of change. As with GCSE, changes in procedures seem to be plausible explanations for some of the observed improvements in grades.

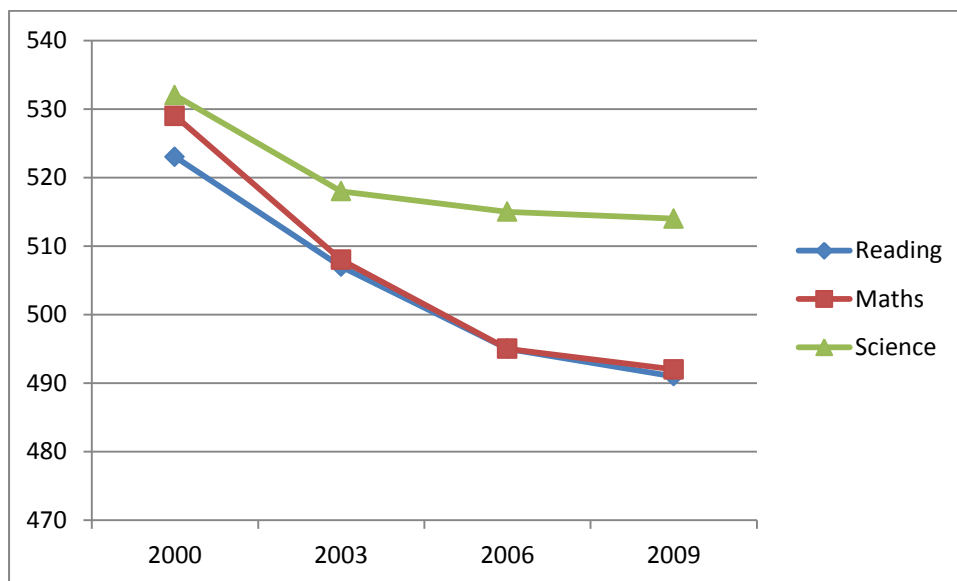
Similarly, the New Labour period also saw notionally increasing ‘standards’ at university. The proportion obtaining a good upper second degree increased from 50% in 1998/9 to 60% in 2010/11. (*Higher Education Statistics Agency statistics online, Qualifications Obtained tables*). While procedural changes of the sort that were introduced at GCSE and A level are unlikely to be so significant in tertiary education, the possibility of ‘grade inflation’ at the very least raises a question mark about the extent of any real increase in standards.

The extent to which ‘standards’ have risen, then, remains contentious, and is probably impossible to answer from official data. The changes in the definitions, and the incentives for schools to play the system, mean that little confidence can be placed on official pronouncements about the magnitude of any increase in standards. We therefore need to examine independent evidence from non-governmental sources.

4. Changes in educational standards – independent studies

The main independent studies available, and the ones which Conservative critics of New Labour have cited, are those of the various cross-national programmes such as OECD's Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA involves standardized tests in literacy, science and maths taken in the last year of lower secondary education, that is in year 11 (typically age 15). Figure 4 shows the scores for the UK in the four rounds of PISA that have been conducted so far. These scores are standardized ones, with the OECD average set to 500. They do not therefore tell us whether standards have increased in absolute terms (which is what the KS2 results reported in previous section purported to measure) but only how a country is performing relative to the OECD average.

Figure 4 UK test results in reading, maths and science: PISA



Source: PISA 2009 Results: What Students Know and Can Do: Student Performance in Reading, Mathematics and Science (Volume I) OECD).

The headline figures for PISA do show a decline in literacy, maths and science in the UK, relative to other countries, between 2000 (the first round of PISA) and 2009. As Jerrim (2011) points out, this is particularly sensitive politically as children who were tested in the first wave in 2000 would have had most of their (compulsory years) education under Conservative governments while those tested in 2009 would have had most of their education under Labour.

There are however considerable problems in drawing conclusions from these trends. These data have been subject to detailed methodological investigation by Brown et al (2007) and Jerrim (2011). Firstly, according to the OECD, the 2000 and 2003 samples for the UK did not meet the PISA response rate standards, and are therefore not suitable for comparison. Low response might well be associated with response bias, with participating schools perhaps being relatively successful ones. This bias may have reduced over time as response rates improved.

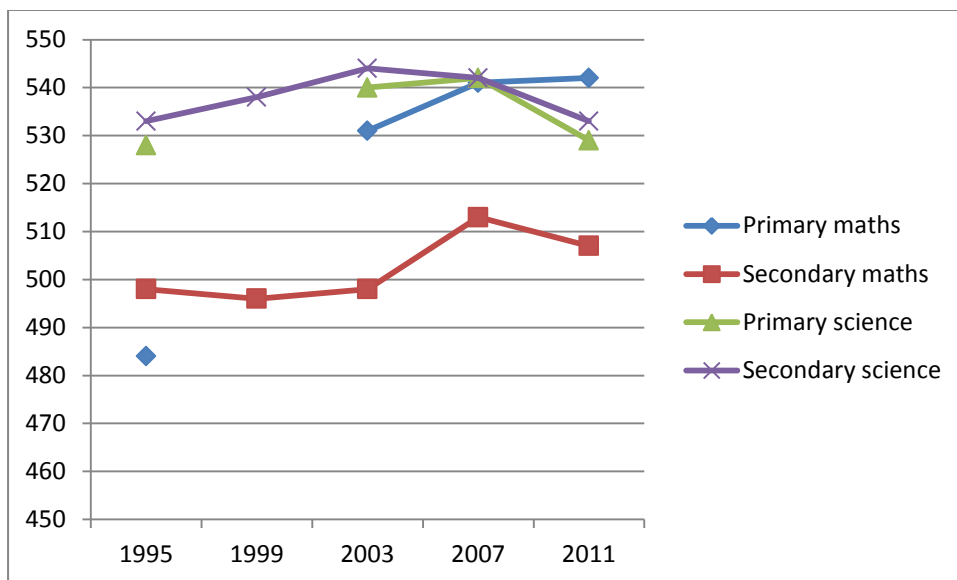
Probably even more importantly, there was a major change in England in 2004, but not in the other countries, in the timing of the tests during the school year. In the first two rounds the tests were conducted between March and May in schools. This was changed in England for the 2007 and 2009 waves to November/December of the same school year, that is five

months earlier. This was an understandable change as schools and their students are under considerable pressure later in the year because of preparation for taking GCSEs (other countries not having high-stakes testing in year 11). Moving the test to earlier in the school year might well account for the improvement in school response rates. But it also means that English children sitting the tests in the two latest waves will have had around half a year's less schooling than their peers in other countries. It would be odd if this was not associated with a decline in observed English students' performance relative to other countries.

So, just as we are sceptical of Labour's claims that standards rose substantially over their period in office, we are sceptical of Conservative claims based on PISA that standards, relative to those in other countries, fell. Moreover, as Jerrim points out, this decline is not replicated in other cross-national programmes of student testing such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). TIMSS is a programme developed by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) which tests children in years 4 and 8. Five rounds of testing have been carried out so far, and in contrast to PISA the results show little change or perhaps a small increase. Figure 5 shows the headline trends for England and Wales.

The contrast between the improvements in maths attainment in TIMSS and the marked decline in PISA is surprising. Jerrim points out that it is unusual cross-nationally for there to be such a large discrepancy between the changes estimates from the two sources. It is hard to think of substantive reasons why, for example, maths performance in years 4 or 8 should be improving while that in year 11 should be declining.

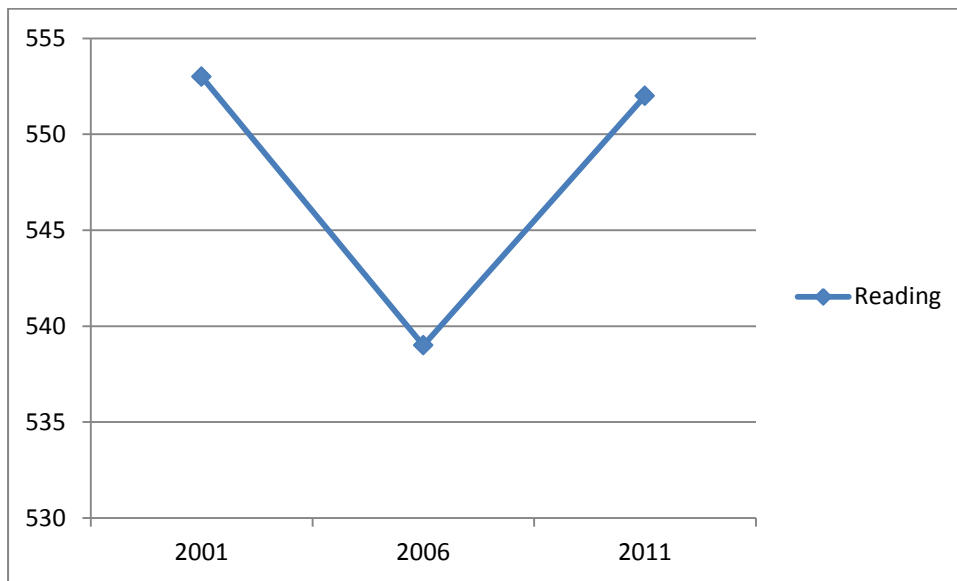
Figure 5 England's scores in Maths and Science 1995-2011. TIMSS



Source: Martin et al (2012), Mullis et al (2012).

A third study that we can draw upon is the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). This is another study developed by the IEA and tests the reading literacy of students in year 4. Like PISA and TIMSS scores are standardized

Figure 6 England's scores in reading literacy 2001-2011, PIRLS



Source: Mullis et al (2012)

As we can see from Figure 6, the three rounds of PIRLS shows a decline between 2001 and 2006 followed by a gain, leading to no trend overall, and suggesting the need for caution in interpreting the ups and downs in test scores. The safest conclusion is that there has probably been little change in British standards.

Much UK education policy has been driven by concerns about basic skills and we do have one final source which attempts to measure the basic skills not of school-children and students but of adults. This is the Skills for Life survey (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2012) which was conducted in 2003 and 2011. The literacy and numeracy assessments used in these two surveys were identical, allowing scores to be compared over time. We compare the youngest cohort, aged 16-24 in 2011, who would have been educated under New Labour, in order to assess whether they performed better or worse than young people of the same age in 2003.

Level 1 is considered to represent functional literacy, and is approximately the level expected of an 11 year old (National Audit Office, 2008). Those scoring below level 1 (at entry levels 1-3 or below) may not be able to write short messages. There was no marked change overall in the proportion of respondents who failed to achieve functional literacy in the 2003 survey (16%) and the 2011 survey (15%). However, there does appear to have been a substantial rise in the proportion achieving level 2 or above, which is designed to be roughly equivalent to a GCSE A-C grade (from 44% to 57% overall). While this does indicate a clear improvement, we find that a similar improvement between 2003 and 2011 occurs in older age groups too. This suggests that the increase in the proportion achieving the highest literacy level cannot straightforwardly be attributed to changes in policies affecting schools.

So where does this leave us? Different sources of evidence suggest different conclusions, but all are beset by methodological problems. It seems safest to conclude that on balance there was little change over time in British levels of attainment relative to those in other countries. Since standards may well have been rising in other countries too, we would not rule out the possibility that absolute standards did rise modestly in Britain, and the Skills for Life Survey

points in the same direction. But there can be little doubt that the official results showing dramatic improvements in standards at KS2, GCSE and A level are grossly inflated.

5. Participation rates at 16+ and HE

In comparison with the measurement of standards, evidence on participation rates is relatively unproblematic. The Labour manifesto of 1997 had singled out low participation among the 16-18 age group as one of the greatest weaknesses in British education and Table 2 shows that there has been a long-term increase in full-time participation rates for this age group, with particularly rapid growth under the third New Labour administration between 2005 and 2010. Some of this increase appears to have been due to a transfer out of work-based learning and employer-funded training into full-time education, but even allowing for this, there is an overall increase in participation.

Participation rates also appear to have caught up to some extent with those in other OECD nations although even in 2010 OECD statistics show that the UK participation rate for 15-19 year olds was only 77% compared with an OECD average of 83% (OECD 2012, Table C1.2). Britain therefore still lags well behind most other advanced economies. The extent to which Britain has actually caught up is also a bit unclear, as other OECD countries have also been increasing their participation rates over this period and, strangely, figures for the UK are missing in the OECD tables prior to 2005. However, from 2005 to 2010 OECD figures do show that Britain narrowed the gap, and this is consistent with the story told in Table 2.

Table 2: participation in education and training of 16-18 year olds, England, 1987-2010

Column percentages

	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
Full-time education	33.3	52.3	56.4	56.1	59.7	70.6
Work-based learning	17.0	12.7	9.8	8.5	7.3	5.7
Employer-funded training	10.2	6.9	5.6	5.0	4.6	3.0
Other education and training	5.2	3.8	5.4	5.7	5.1	4.9
Employment	25.4	13.9	14.3	15.0	12.8	8.4
NEET	9.2	11.3	8.9	9.9	10.7	7.5

Source: table A17, DfE/BIS Research and Statistics Gateway, participation in education, training and employment.

Most of the increase since 2005 appears to be due to an increase in the percentage taking vocational qualifications other than A levels. The percentage securing these qualifications (outside apprenticeships) increased from 3.0% in 2004 to 14.5% in 2010 while the proportion gaining A levels barely changed over this period.

The timing of this increase in participation coincides with Labour's introduction of Educational Maintenance Allowances in 2004 and of Vocational Diplomas in 2005. While

some of the increase in participation is probably due to long-term social changes that would have happened anyway, New Labour can surely take some credit too. Rather than the much-trumpeted but unreliable increase in standards, New Labour's greater achievements were probably in participation rates.

There was also an increase in participation in higher education. When New Labour came to power, higher education participation rates had grown from around 14% in the 1980s (Halsey 1988) to over 20% in 1992 and had reached 31% among the 17-20 year olds by 1999 (National Statistics 2008 Supplementary Table A). In 2001, the 50% participation goal became enshrined in the Labour manifesto with the delivery date set for 2011. Indeed, by 2010/11, a participation rate of 47% was achieved, although the data on participation now includes all those 'under the age of 30', an aggregate age group that had, in fact, already achieved a 40% participation rate in 2000 (National Statistics 2008, Table 1). Once again, then, procedural changes may inflate the apparent gains. In comparison to other OECD countries, the higher education participation rate in the United Kingdom in 2009 was just above the OECD average (OECD 2011, p. 308).

6. Levelling up?

While the evidence on standards under New Labour is highly unsatisfactory and contentious, there is greater agreement on trends in inequality of educational achievements at the end of compulsory schooling. Four independent (non-governmental) studies using different datasets have all reached the same conclusion, namely that inequality has been declining.

First, in an analysis of PISA data Jerrim shows evidence of a reduction in the association between family background and average test scores between 2000 and 2009. The low response rates of the first two rounds of PISA might bias the results in the same way that they potentially biased the measure of standards that we discussed in Section 4 above. However, one might have expected the bias to have worked in the opposite direction; that is a low school response rate might disproportionately have affected disadvantaged schools and thus underestimated the extent of inequality.

A second study by Gregg and Macmillan (2010), using a range of British data, looks at the strength of association between standardized family income and various measures of educational achievement such as the number of 'good' GCSEs obtained. They find that in the most recent data (LSYPE) covering students born in 1989-90, who would have reached the end of compulsory schooling in 2005-6 and thus would have experienced most of their primary and secondary schooling under New Labour, the background/attainment association was significantly weaker than it had been for children born 20 years earlier (as measured in the 1970 birth cohort study).

In a third study Lupton et al (2007), using official data, showed a dramatic decline in school-level inequalities in GCSE results, as measured by the percentage of pupils in the school in receipt of Free School Meals (in effect a measure of poverty, not of social class). They also found, using the Youth Cohort Surveys a modest reduction in social class inequalities measured at the individual level between 1996 and 2004.

The same problems however that affected comparisons over time in standards when using GCSE results also apply to measures of inequality in GCSE attainment. While the increasing

inclusion of GCSE 'equivalent' qualifications in the third Labour administration will not have affected studies of trends up until 2005 or thereabouts, the problem of grade inflation remains. That is, 5 good GCSEs in 1997 will not necessarily mean the same as 5 good GCSEs in 2005: the goalposts have been moved.

In order to deal with the issue of potential grade inflation at GCSE, we carried out a further study of our own using YCS data but ranking students according to their points score at GCSE. We compared class differences in achievement of scores in the top and bottom thirds of the distribution. In effect then we are standardizing or 'normalizing' achievement by looking at the chances of achieving (or avoiding) a given threshold in the distribution of scores. Using this method we found a modest decline in class inequalities between 1997 and 2003, although the decline was markedly greater if unstandardized scores were used. (See Sullivan et al 2011.)

Unfortunately, later waves of YCS do not provide sufficient information for the derivation of a point score, which means we cannot extend the time series beyond 2003. However all four studies do show some modest degree of equalization over the first two Labour administrations, and while they are all beset by the usual methodological problems, they are at least independent studies using a range of different datasets and carried out independently of government. We do not find the wild variations in estimated trends that we found when investigating standards. This consensus is also very different from that achieved by studies of social mobility in the population as a whole, where debates continue.

While much of the analytical focus has been on GCSEs, since this is a crucial transition point in the British educational system, Gregg and Macmillan (2010) and Sullivan et al (2011) have also looked at class inequalities in the achievement of A levels at the end of upper secondary education. Here the evidence is more mixed with Gregg and Macmillan finding little change but Sullivan et al finding a modest narrowing of class differentials.

The picture is also somewhat unclear with respect to higher education. In public debate the focus has largely been on access rates of students from state and private schools respectively. Students at private schools are typically more advantaged in social backgrounds than those at state schools, and so school type tends to be treated as a proxy of social background. Overall, this is not unreasonable, and we do find a modest increase in the share of state-educated students at university, Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data showing that the proportion of state-educated students at university had risen from 85% in 1998/9 to 89% in 2010/11. To some extent this will be a straightforward consequence of university expansion. Given that high proportions of privately-educated students were already attending university in 1998, any further increase in university numbers had to be drawn state schools.

A further important consideration is that it increasingly matters not only **whether** but **where** an individual enrolls at university. Higher education in Britain has become increasingly differentiated since the former polytechnics were given the status of universities in 1992 by the then Conservative government. Students attending elite universities (usually in Britain regarded as the so-called Russell Group of 24 research intensive universities) secure substantial wage premiums over those attending the former polytechnics. In general class inequalities are greater in access to elite institutions than to non-elite ones, and one might expect these inequalities to be more resilient over time as well (Lucas 2001). Our own calculations, using UCAS data, suggest that improvement in the representation of students from manual backgrounds at Russell Group institutions has been negligible, going from 28 %

in 1996/7 to 29% in 2006/7. This suggests that, as of 2006/7, the feared adverse effects of tuition fees on equality of access to universities had not occurred (although it appears to have reduced numbers of applicants). Possibly the efforts of OFFA to widen access mitigated the countervailing trends arising from tuition fees.

7. Can New Labour take any credit?

Even where we have found convincing evidence of change under New Labour, as with participation rates and levelling up, the question inevitably arises as to whether the changes were due to autonomous developments in society or the economy, to the continuation of longer-standing educational policies that Labour had not reversed, or to actual initiatives introduced by New Labour. Evidence on acceleration in the rate following specific initiatives (for example vocational diplomas) gives us some clues. Other clues can be provided by the evaluations of specific Labour initiatives that have been conducted. To be sure, evidence of a successful evaluation of a small-scale pilot initiative cannot straightforwardly be generalized to the results when the pilot is rolled out nationally. But a rigorous evaluation showing that a particular scheme was successful may give us more confidence that the observed results from the aggregate data were the consequence of the policy initiative and not simply of wider social change.

Appendix 1 lists Labour policy initiatives according to whether they were evaluated or not, and describes the findings of official evaluations and other key evidence on each intervention. Notably, some major policies, such as school 'choice' and league tables were never evaluated officially, though they have attracted considerable attention from researchers. Other important reforms, such as the modularisation of A levels and GCSEs and substantial changes in the 14-16 curriculum were subject to no official evaluation and also generated relatively little research interest.

Despite the resources devoted to policy evaluations by the New Labour government, with its declared belief in 'evidence-driven policy', much of the evaluation evidence is disappointingly uninformative. The government often failed to introduce policies in such a way that they could be rigorously evaluated, by piloting and maintaining the absence of the policy in control areas for long enough for the presence or absence of results to be tested. Our interpretation of the majority of the official evaluations listed in our appendix is that they range from researchers drawing appropriately tentative conclusions in the face of difficult methodological issues, to essentially puff-pieces for government policies. We can single-out the evaluation of the Literacy Hour (Machin and McNally 2008) and the evaluation of Education Maintenance Allowances (Dearden et. al. 2004) as robust studies which convincingly show positive results for the policies concerned. Findings from evaluations of some flagship programmes such as Sure Start are less clear cut.

Overall, the results of the evaluation studies do not lead us to make any radical revisions to the generally negative conclusions drawn from the aggregate data. In particular, apart from the Literacy Hour, we find little positive evidence from the evaluations that Labour's many new initiatives (or the continuation of previous Conservative initiatives) to raise standards had substantial effects. Nor do the evaluations really help us to determine whether the declining class inequalities at GCSE were intended consequences of Labour reforms, were brought about by autonomous social changes, or were unintended artefacts arising from the increasing 'noisiness' of GCSEs as a measure of attainment. On the other hand, the

evaluations do not require us to weaken our provisional conclusions that Labour initiatives probably contributed to increased participation for the 16-18 age group.

8. Conclusions

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions through the fog of unreliable and unvalidated statistics and patchy evaluations. Labour clearly put more resources into education than the previous Conservative administrations had done and brought Britain back towards the OECD average in the share of GDP devoted to education. Some of these resources were surely needed for making good the backlog of neglect of the infrastructure. Some were also needed to fund expansion post-16.

The trends in standards, which Labour made its central plank, remain highly controversial. We discount extreme claims, whether Conservative ones based on PISA data or Labour ones based on their own administrative data. Evidence from TIMSS and PIRLS suggests that Britain more or less held its own in comparison with other countries, with perhaps a similar (and probably) modest increase in standards much as we assume occurred in other countries. We are therefore inclined to be sceptical about the effectiveness of measures continued from Conservative governments such as testing, league tables, and parental choice. At any rate they did not lead to any major improvements in comparisons with developments in competitor countries (not all of which embraced this kind of programme).

There were however some Labour successes, albeit not the ones that New Labour emphasized in its own publicity. In particular there is clear evidence of increased participation in post-compulsory (16-18) education, with Britain catching up with, although still not reaching, the OECD average. Labour policies such as EMAs and the introduction of vocational qualifications might well have been responsible in part for this achievement

There is also evidence of narrowing inequalities in achievement at the end of compulsory schooling although it is not clear how much credit New Labour can take for this equalization or whether it was due to wider social changes, perhaps arising from the changing labour-market situation facing young people. Conversely the introduction of fees for HE do not appear to have made inequalities worse.

On balance then education represents a modest success for New Labour although the biggest story is really the over-claiming from both sides about their respective successes and failures and the poor quality and lack of commensurability over time of the statistical data. The UK Statistics Authority really needs to get its act together.

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Appendix: Policies and evaluation evidence

Quasi-market reforms, parental 'school choice'	
Date	1980s onwards
Evaluated	No
Other evidence	
	Little evidence of effects on attainment overall (Gibbons, et al. 2008). There is no consensus that market reforms have increased school segregation (Goldstein and Noden 2003; Gorard and Fitz 1998).
National tests and league tables	
Date	1990s onwards
Evaluated	No
Other evidence	
	Clearly test scores and examination results have improved, but questions remain over the extent to which this reflects real learning gains for pupils. Some unintended consequences include a focus on 'borderline' pupils (Gillborn and Youdell 2000), and distortions in the curriculum offered to maximise league table performance (Wolf 2011).
Specialist schools	
Date 1997	1997
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	Levacic and Jenkins (2006)
Results	Schools applied for specialist status, and, if successful, were awarded additional funding. This selectivity into specialist status poses obvious problems for any evaluation. Levacic and Jenkins (2006) conclude that 'Taken overall the superior effects of specialist schools are modest in size, not uniform across specialisms and dependent on the assumption of no selection bias in specialist school recruitment that is not controlled for by the observed pupil data'.
Other evidence	Gorard and Taylor (2001) found that specialist schools have shown a greater tendency to take proportionately fewer children from poor families over time, especially where these schools are also their own admission authorities.
Cut in class sizes	
Date	1997
Evaluated	No
Other evidence	It benefited suburban rather than inner-city constituencies as, due to falling rolls, inner city schools already had few classes of over 30 children (Sullivan and Whitty 2007)
The Literacy Hour	
Date	1998
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	Machin and McNally (2008)
Evidence	Substantial improvements in reading and English for modest cost
National Numeracy and Literacy strategies	

Date	1998
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	Earl et. al. (2003)
Other evidence	The evaluation was based on school visits and analysis of performance data. The authors acknowledge that it is difficult to draw conclusions about the effects of the strategies on pupil learning, although Key Stage attainment rose. The methods employed by the evaluation are not greatly convincing, see Goldstein (2003) http://www.bristol.ac.uk/cmm/team/hg/evaluating-the-evaluators.html
Sure Start	
Date	1998
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	Belsky et. al. (2007)
Evidence	Early results were not encouraging, and showed some disadvantage to living in sure start areas for disadvantaged families, possibly due to services being taken up by the more advantaged. Later results were much more positive, but it is not clear whether the difference in results should be attributed to improvements in Sure Start services, or to differences in the methods used in the earlier and later evaluation. The earlier evaluation compared children and families in SS areas and control areas (later to become SS areas) at the same time. The later evaluation used MCS families, with children born on average 2 years earlier than the sure start sample, living in similar areas with no sure start programme.
Tuition fees	
Date	1998 (variable fees introduced in 2003)
Evaluated	No
Other evidence	Galindo-Rueda et. al. (2004) state that there is a widening gap in participation between richer and poorer students, but not as a direct impact of tuition fees, as it occurred prior to this.
Teaching Assistants	
	1999
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	Blatchford et. al. (2009)
Evidence	Teaching assistants reduce teachers' stress levels and improve classroom discipline but do not boost pupils' progress. Instead, children with the most TA support actually made less progress than similar children with less support, and this could not be explained by the children's characteristics.
Excellence in Cities	
Date	1999
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	Kendall et. al. (2005), and (Machin, et al. 2005)

Evidence	A cost-benefit analysis suggested that EiC was potentially cost-effective in terms of long-term wage returns to improvements at Key Stage 3. The evaluation stresses the complexity of strand and area based initiatives, where partnerships have freedom to implement EiC and its individual strands as determined by local needs. The strongest benefits were for children of medium to high ability in disadvantaged schools.
Academies	
Date	2000
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008)
Evidence	Some evidence of improvement, but concerns that "some Academies have used vocational courses to secure higher and faster improvements in attainment" and also that exclusions are higher in academies than in comparable schools.
Other evidence	Curtis et. al. (2008) find a mixed picture on attainment within academies, and argue that gauging effects on neighbouring schools is difficult.
Modularisation of A levels and GCSEs	
Date	2000
Evaluated	No
Introduction of new vocational qualifications, including at 14-16	
Date	2000
Evaluated	No
Other evidence	Wolf (2011) points out that most English young people now take some vocational courses pre-16, and the majority follow largely vocational courses post-16. Wolf finds that large number of young people are taking qualifications which the labour market does not reward at all, and young people have been encouraged to take 14-16 options which block their progression to more valuable post-16 options
Teacher performance related pay	
Date	2000
	No
Pupil learning credits scheme	
	2001-2003
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	Braun et. al. (2005)
Evidence	A difference in differences analysis suggested that the policy had a positive effect. An attempt to relate the costs of the pilot scheme to these benefits concluded that the pilot scheme was cost effective although this was based on some strong assumptions.
AimHigher: Excellence Challenge	
Date	2001
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	Emmerson et. al. (2006)

Evidence	Aimed to raise FE and HE participation among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. An analysis of the Labour Force Survey comparing areas in which the policy was implemented to control areas did not find statistically significant results.
Teach First	
Date	2002
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	Muijs et. al. (2010)
Evidence	The evaluation did not consider differences between children who were taught by Teach First teachers and others, but rather looked at differences between Teach First schools and other schools, using National Pupil Database data. Although causality cannot be demonstrated, the results are suggestive of strong positive effects, with 39-47% of the school level variance in GCSE results remaining after statistical controls being accounted for by Teach First status.
Gifted and talented	
Date	2002
Evaluated	No
Increase in faith schools	
Date	2002
Evaluated	No
Other evidence	Allen and West (2009) find that faith schools create ethnic/religious segregation, and cater largely to the affluent.
Schools Interactive Whiteboard Expansion project (SWE)	
Date	2003/4
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	Moss et. al. (2007)
Evidence	This mixed-methods study examined effects on teaching and learning; motivation, attendance and behaviour; and attainment at KS3 and GCSE. The statistical analysis found no impact on outcomes.
Education Maintenance Allowance	
Date	2004
Evaluated	Yes
Main report	Dearden et. al. (2009)
Evidence	EMA increased initial participation of eligible young people by over 4% points, and also protected against drop-out
Trust schools	
Date	2006
Evaluated	No