

Education predictions: What does 2025 have in store for schools, trusts and universities?

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From a new Ofsted inspection framework to updated safeguarding guidance, plenty of change is anticipated in education in 2025.

Alongside government intervention, which may also address issues such as ‘missing’ children in the education system and insufficient provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities, schools and academy trusts must also be aware of increased scrutiny in their data compliance.

In higher education, meanwhile, there will be a greater onus on universities to become more financially self-sufficient while also contributing to central government missions on devolution and the UK’s quest to be a global science superpower.

Lawyers in Browne Jacobson’s education team provide their predictions and hopes for the sector over the coming year.

Ofsted inspections

We know that 2025 will bring a new inspection framework and methodology for [school inspections](#).

Report cards aren’t a panacea but my hope is that what we end up with redresses the balance around inspection.

I would also expect to see some progress on developing a system for the inspection of trusts, assuming the government remains committed to this policy.

Whilst the immediate priority has been reform of inspection at school level, as this and wider education reform gathers momentum, the role, scope and case for trust inspection should be properly explored.

Katie Michelin, Partner

Parental complaints

Schools, trusts, trade unions, charities and professional bodies in the education sector have repeatedly called for action to address the persistent issue of complex and vexatious [parent complaints](#), as well as the negative impact of unacceptable behaviour towards schools, staff and governors.

So far, there has been little apparent interest from political leaders or the Department for Education (DfE) in addressing these issues.

System change is needed to alleviate the burden on educational professionals by implementing clearer guidelines, removing duplication and [revising the regulatory framework](#).

Victoria Hatton, Senior Associate

Special education needs and disabilities (SEND)

I don’t expect to see much in the way of actual change in [SEND](#) this year, simply because the task at hand is too large.

As the chair of the Education Committee put it, any real change will “[take years of careful reform](#)”.

However, we can expect to see some recommendations from the committee as to the steps that should be taken to try to solve the “SEND crisis”.

Any recommendations will have to come this year, not least because the “safety valve” statutory override for local authorities is due to come to an end in 2026.

Laura Thompson, Senior Associate

Safeguarding guidance

In 2025, we expect to see a replacement for Keeping Children Safe in Education, the core safeguarding guidance in force since 2015. In that time, it has grown from 61 to 185 pages.

As well as overhauling the guidance to streamline it, the new version also needs to specifically address safeguarding in trusts, clarify social media checks expectation, more comprehensively address the gender questioning issue, and introduce AI as a risk but also an opportunity to support and enhance safeguarding standards.

Dai Durbridge, Partner

Gender-questioning guidance

Schools continue to seek clear direction on effectively supporting children who are exploring their gender identity. There is a pressing need for guidance addressing responsibilities under the Equality Act, handling discrepancies between a child's and a parent's views on social transitioning, managing residential school trips, and navigating issues of data protection, confidentiality, and safeguarding. Although the Cass review recommendations were released last April, the draft guidance for schools has been withdrawn from the Department for Education (DfE) website. Forecasting the release date of the guidance is challenging. Hoping for its publication by the end of this academic year may be overly optimistic.

Hayley O'Sullivan, Senior Associate

Pupil exclusions

In December, the DfE revealed that the [suspension and exclusion rates for pupils](#) are now at the highest level for the past seven years – and that trend, from our experience, looks set to continue.

A number of recent reports have highlighted that the decisions by schools have been driven by a decline in behaviour of pupils post-Covid, which points to wider system issues, including on children's social care interventions, SEND and parenting support.

Despite this, there is no change in the law proposed in the [Children's Welfare and Schools Bill](#) and it seems likely therefore that rather than changing the power to exclude pupils, the DfE will seek to change the incentives for schools through Ofsted inspection report reforms.

Children missing from school register

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill includes the welcome proposal of a local authority register of pupils not in school in each area.

This has long been proposed by governments of various colours. However, creating registers alone won't be enough to protect children's welfare and rights to education.

Recent safeguarding reviews regarding children who have been victims of abuse indicate the relevant authorities have been aware of their circumstances, with missed opportunities for intervention being the crux of the problem.

Having a register therefore isn't a panacea to resolve those safeguarding issues. With the largest changes proposed to local government in a generation, local authorities will have to ensure these new requirements won't get lost in any wider shake-up.

Philip Wood, Senior Associate

Data protection

In 2025, the role of AI in education will surge, spotlighting not only data protection but also concerns around discrimination, bias and transparency.

This puts schools under new pressures; whilst the Information Commissioner's Office focuses on protection of children's data and the need for AI risk assessments, the government pro-innovation approach requires schools to prepare students for an AI-driven future and use technology to manage staff workload.

Ofsted's inclusion of AI use in its inspection criteria demands good governance. Schools need to invest more in AI risk management, with high quality advice from their data protection officer (DPO). However, whilst AI risks may be initially spotted by school DPOs, a team approach is needed.

Schools behind on the basics of [data protection risk](#) or digital strategy will face challenges adapting to these rapid changes.

Claire Archibald, Legal Director

School estates

One of Labour's big pledges is to create 100,000 additional childcare places across the country. Coming at a time of falling school rolls in many areas, we expect to see many schools reorganising their sites, and repurposing existing classrooms to make way for new or expanded early years foundation stage units.

Peter Jackson, Senior Associate

Independent schools

This year, I anticipate a sustained trend in both mergers and acquisitions within the sector as schools look to consolidate.

This movement, involving both charitable and commercial groups, is driven by the need for stronger financial stability, operational efficiencies and enhanced educational offerings.

These strategic alignments and transactions are becoming pivotal for schools aiming to broaden their reach and secure a competitive edge in a rapidly-changing environment.

Schools will need to be adaptable, innovative and forward-thinking to meet the evolving needs of students and families, while also navigating the complexities of compliance and governance.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill makes provision for the safeguarding and welfare of children and, when enacted, will contain changes to regulation in the independent education sector. The landscape is likely to look very different in five years' time.

Vicky Wilson, Senior Associate

Higher education financial sustainability

Higher education institutions will continue to face severe struggles in 2025. A modest uplift of undergraduate tuition fees is for many providers wiped out by a much larger increase in employer national insurance contributions.

We are expecting policy and regulatory announcements in numerous areas affecting HE during the first half of the year:

Restructuring and financial sustainability

A legal migration white paper and a revised international education strategy may have an impact on the recruitment of international students and researchers alike, which remain both fundamental to secure income and maintain research excellency.

The Office for Students will be appointing a new permanent chair and adopt a new strategy, which will have an impact on its approach and potential interventions to securing the resilience of the sector and an orderly market exit of any failing providers.

We would welcome government interventions in the following areas:

1. An insolvency regime for providers that are outside of the scope of current insolvency legislation (such as Royal Charter institutions or statutory HE corporations) to provide greater clarity for creditors of any struggling providers;
2. Changes to VAT rules facilitating the provision of shared services between providers; and
3. Changes to the competition law framework enabling stronger collaboration between providers in order to achieve efficiencies.

Research, industry and innovation

We are looking forward to the full implementation of the government's planned investment in R&D, life sciences and innovation accelerators.

Together with our clients, we will keenly await the details of the various programmes and funding streams for academic research, industry partnerships and spin-out.

The appointment of a new chief executive to UKRI may also shape the agenda and strategy of this funding body.

Devolution and regional regeneration

"How can science and tech innovation boost regional economic growth?"

This is the subject of an ongoing inquiry led by the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee in the House of Commons.

As significant local employers, purchasers of services and goods, educators of the next generation workforce, and often owners of large estates, universities will be key actors in local and regional regeneration schemes and revised devolution schemes.

Nathalie Jacoby-Danesh, Partner

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