



# Leading with Purpose Further Reading & Resources:

UK Cultural Policy,  
1980-2020s Timeline  
and analysis

by John Riches

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# UK Cultural Policy, 1980–2020s Timeline and analysis

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*The following timeline – and its companion piece, 'The Policy, The Impact And The Mismatch', in our series **Leading with Purpose: Cultural Education in Practice** – represent a snapshot of the political climate from the past 40 years. While creative and cultural education is now an established field, it is still a relatively new concept. This timeline tracks its evolution and explores the key influences that have shaped its development, including their impact on the careers of the ten leaders who have contributed to this work.*

*At the time of publishing, we are just over halfway through the 2020s and change is happening at what seems like a record pace. Rather than rendering this analysis obsolete, it serves to illustrate the increasing challenges leaders face in navigating a political climate driven by short-term decision-making.*

## The 1980s: Thatcherism, Marketisation & Resistance

- **Political Context:** Thatcherism, neoliberalism, a focus on individual agency as opposed to collectivisation.
- **Policy & Ideology:**
  - **Education Reform Act (1988):** Introduced the National Curriculum, standardised testing (SATs), and league tables, shifting control from local authorities to central government and parents.
  - **National Curriculum (from 1989):** Initially included Art and Music as foundation subjects, though the curriculum's prescriptive nature was criticised for limiting creative teaching.
  - **Introduction of Local Management of Schools:** Schools became responsible for their own budgets, forcing hard choices that often sidelined arts provision.
- **Funding & Sector Response:**
  - **Arts Council England (ACE)** budget cuts; increased pressure to demonstrate economic value and attract private sponsorship.
  - **Section 28 (1988):** Prohibited the 'promotion of homosexuality' by local authorities, creating a chilling effect for LGBTQ+ cultural discourse in schools and arts organisations.
  - **Cultural Response:** Proliferation of community arts movements, independent venues, and DIY culture in opposition to the mainstream. Groups and collectives such as the Black Arts Movement gained momentum, creating space for marginalised voices.

## The 1990s: 'Cool Britannia', Social Inclusion & the Creative Industries

- **Political Context:** John Major Conservative government, then New Labour (1997), 'Third Way' politics, 'Cool Britannia', social inclusion agenda.
- **Policy & Ideology:**
  - **National Lottery (1994):** Created new funding

streams for the arts (e.g., NESTA) but also began a shift towards project-based, competitive funding.

- **Dearing Review (1994):** Slashed per-student funding for universities, beginning the marketisation of Higher Education.
- **New Labour government elected (1997):** Embraced the arts as tools for social inclusion and economic growth.
- **Creative Industries Mapping Document (DCMS, 1998):** Formally defined the 'creative industries' and placed their economic value at the heart of government policy.
- **Funding & Sector Response:**
  - **NESTA (1998):** Established with a National Lottery endowment to support innovation across science, tech, and the arts, including a proactive learning programme.
  - **All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture & Education (NACCCE Report, 1999):** Landmark report arguing for creativity as a central purpose of education for all young people, directly influencing future policy.
  - **Sure Start (1998):** Incorporated creative play in early years interventions.
- **Political Context:** New Labour entrenchment, with a focus on targets, public service reform, and accountability.
- **Policy & Ideology:**
  - **Every Child Matters (2003):** Framework for holistic child development, which cultural organisations were encouraged to support.
  - **Tuition Fees Introduced (1998, raised 2004 & 2006):** Market logic firmly embedded in Higher Education.
- **Funding & Sector Response:**
  - **Creative Partnerships (2002-2011):** England's flagship

## The 2000s: Accountability, Partnership & Fragmentation

## The 2010s: Austerity, Decline & Re-evaluation

creative learning programme, placing artists in schools in areas of need. Developed the role of the 'Creative Agent' as a broker between education and cultural organisations.

- **Find Your Talent (2008-2010):** Pilot programme for a universal cultural offer for children.
- **Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE) (2008):** Charity established to deliver Creative Partnerships and export its model internationally.
- **The 'McMaster Review' (2008):** *Supporting Excellence in the Arts* shifted ACE's focus from "social inclusion" back towards "artistic excellence," creating tension and confusion in the sector.
- **Political Context:** Coalition government (2010), then Conservative, era of austerity, massive public spending cuts.
- **Policy & Ideology:**
  - **Austerity Budgets (2010 onwards):** Drastic cuts to local authority budgets, leading to the decimation of youth services and local arts provision.
  - **English Baccalaureate (EBacc) (2010):** School performance measure that excluded the arts, leading to a dramatic decline in GCSE and A-Level entries in creative subjects.
  - **National Curriculum Review (2014):** Further marginalised arts subjects.
- **Funding & Sector Response:**
  - **ACE's National Portfolio:** Became an even more critical lifeline for organisations, but also a source of strain due to increased pressure to deliver outcomes with less money.
  - **The Durham Commission on Creativity and Education (2019):** Major report (ACE/Durham University) making

## The 2020s: Pandemic, Crisis & Strategic Renewal

an evidence-based case for creativity in education as a matter of social justice and economic necessity.

- **The 'Valued & Visible' campaign:** Led by the Cultural Learning Alliance, it was a sector-wide response to highlight the impact of the EBacc on creativity in education.
- **Political Context:** COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, cost-of-living crisis, increased focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).
- **Policy & Ideology:**
  - **Cultural Recovery Fund (2020–2021):** Government lifeline to prevent sector collapse during COVID-19.
  - **ACE's Let's Create Strategy (2020–2030):** Ten-year strategy focusing on 'Creative People', 'Cultural Communities', and a 'Creative & Cultural Country' – an attempt to support a synthesis of artistic quality and inclusivity.
  - **Removing the EBacc (2025)** – To benefit the study of arts and creative subjects. Arts organisations and trade bodies lobbied to end the EBacc attainment measure, which places a premium on the study of traditionally academic subjects including English, Maths, a language, and a science.
  - **Curriculum and Assessment Review (2024 – 2025)** The Government commissioned Professor Becky Francis CBE to convene and chair a panel of experts to conduct a review of the curriculum and assessment system in England, including qualification pathways, across the primary, secondary and 16–19 phases.



- **Funding & Sector Response:**

- **Creativity Collaboratives (2021-2026):** A direct recommendation of the Durham Commission, testing models for teaching for creativity in schools across England.
- **Ongoing Challenges:** The legacy of austerity and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis; the reform of crucial support systems like Access to Work; attacks on EDI – whilst presently more prevalent in the US than the UK, an emboldened right-wing will, in time, be attacking one of the core tenets – equity of access – of the Cultural Sector.

This article is part of A New Direction's Leading with Purpose: Cultural Education in Practice, a series exploring the evolution of cultural educational leadership, insights, observations, and practical tools. You can read them all here:  
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