

The education revolution

By Susan Bassnett,
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Whenever education ministers are challenged about the state of schools and universities in the United Kingdom, they respond by pointing out that considerable sums of money have been poured into education. This is undeniable; millions of pounds have been put into the country's education systems (in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland) over the last decade.

But the point is not that money has not been made available, but rather that it has been so badly spent it might as well have been torn up and burned. Endless short-term initiatives, wizard schemes put into practice with minimal or zero consultation, a flagrant disregard for the advice of teachers and academics have wasted millions and - despite all the rhetoric [1] - have not improved standards at any level.

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She is responding to the *Economist* report, "Britannia redux", published on (2 February 2007) [3]

Also in openDemocracy's debate on the report:

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Isabel Hilton, "The "Economist" and Britain's future" (2 February 2007) [4]

Merril Stevenson, "Britain and globalisation: a good marriage" (2 February 2007) [5]

Tony Curzon Price, "Economist redux" (5 February 2007) [6]

John Palmer, "Europe won't go away" (6 February 2007) [7]

Nor, far more significantly, have educational aspirations been raised, though expectations may have been. Forced to pay more than ever before, students are being turned into customers and higher education into a commodity [8]. This despite all kinds of endeavours to widen access and bring more disadvantaged young people up through the system beyond the age of 16.

There are two fundamental problems underlying education in Britain and both are connected. The first is that crucially, there is a total lack of joined-up thinking about policy for primary,

secondary and tertiary education. Everyone, except government, seems to know that changes made in teaching methods or curriculum at one level have a knock-on effect everywhere else in the system.

So if you don't teach history [9], inevitably a generation will have no understanding of how communities and a sense of national identity can exist. If you cut language-teaching [10] in secondary schools, fewer pupils will apply to study languages at university, language departments will close and there will be no trained people to introduce languages back at any level. If you start testing children when they should still be learning to play and interact with one another in nursery classrooms, they will be bored to death with school by the time they hit their teens.

It is not rocket-science to realise that school league-tables will lead to spoon-feeding in the classroom to ensure good results, which means that often pupils with excellent GCSE and A level scores arrive at university unable to think.

The second major problem, linked to the first, is the absence of any sensible educational philosophy. Prating on about the national good, setting percentage targets for higher-education places, inventing jargon and having some quango rejig [11] the curriculum every couple of years to accommodate some barrel-scraping junior minister's [12] new idea is not a sensible way forward.

The UK has lost it's base in manufacturing industry, but there is a huge need for good-quality vocational-training programmes. We need graduates who are literate, numerate and can operate in more than one language. We need to train and incentivise teachers who increasingly see their role as more akin to social work and not education. We need to cut the continuous improvement claptrap and recognise honestly that there are big problems throughout the system that can't be solved by silly short-term thinking.

Until that happens, Britain's once-prized educational system will continue to slide, those who can afford [13] to will send their children to private schools and our best brains will go where their talents are recognised and adequately rewarded.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-britannia_redux/economist_education_4360.jsp

Links:

[1] <http://education.independent.co.uk/higher/article1210271.ece>

[2] http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=authC2D9C28A1123b1B723mUn17D7D53target=_blank

[3] http://www.economist.com/world/britain/displayStory.cfm?story_id=8582240target=_blank

[4] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-britannia_redux/economist_4310.jsp

[5] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-britannia_redux/good_4314.jsp

[6] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-britannia_redux/redux_4319.jsp

[7] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-britannia_redux/redux_palmer_4323.jsp

[8] <http://education.independent.co.uk/higher/article2181869.ece>

[9] <http://www.history.ac.uk/education/sept/>

[10] <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,1962813,00.html>

[11] <http://www.britishcouncil.org/usa-education-policy-uk-update-january07.htm>

[12] <http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/comment/story/0,9828,993383,00.html>

[13] <http://www.news-medical.net/?id=21388>



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