

Education is losing its validity as a way forward for the younger generations

Patrick Ainley and Martin Allen rail against the education system in the UK, arguing that because education cannot meet employment aspirations its main purpose has become social control over youth.

Mass education in England and Wales belatedly followed the three stages typical of developed economies. In the first, universal elementary schooling was only finally established in 1902 with a minority proceeding to secondary level. In the second stage, the 1944 Education Act introduced universal secondary schooling with a minority going on via sixth forms to tertiary level. The proportion rose from c.2% after the war to c.7% by the 1970s with the new campus and technical universities recommended by Robbins in 1963. Later augmented by the polytechnics that had introduced a 'binary division' to higher education (HE) just as it was being phased out at secondary level by comprehensives, the third stage of mass tertiary provision did not begin until the 1990s.



It is now generally forgotten that this last stage followed the collapse of industrial apprenticeships in the 1970s and their replacement in the 1980s by Youth Training Schemes. These were so unpopular young people voted with their feet and stayed on in new school sixth forms or went to FE. From there increasing numbers drifted up to HE, especially to former-polytechnics in an Americanised system with community colleges and high schools leading to Million+/State or Russell/Ivy league universities, plus a few liberal arts 'campus universities'. Only those NEETs (Not in Employment Education or Training) who became the focus of New Labour concern – and whom they once claimed to have reduced to 8% of 16-18 year olds (today 15%+) – were the equivalent of US 'high school drop-outs' from this system.

Despite cramming more in, widening participation to HE 'increased systemic and systematic forms of inequality for individuals and institutions across subjects and levels of education' (David 2009, 150). Indeed, widening participation may only have served to soften up the system for the subsequent free-market in fees differentiated by subject and institution. 'Education education education' had however replaced *Training without jobs* during the Blair-Brown boom with promises of a 'global knowledge economy' powered by computers accompanying the expansion of office, service and middle management for those who were qualified for these increasingly graduate-entry jobs. More school and college leavers were more qualified though – particularly since the introduction of unitary GCSEs at 16 in 1986 and modular A-levels thereafter. Young women especially ran up the down-escalator of depreciating qualifications so that Blair's target of 'half of 18-30 years in some form of higher education' was nearly met for females if not males.

This apparent professionalization of the proletariat disguised a proletarianisation of the professions as automation, outsourcing and deskilling simultaneously reached up the occupational hierarchy to reduce formerly secure and exclusive professions towards the conditions of waged labour. Only in 2008 did this become clear to a so-called *Lost Generation* of overqualified and under-employed school, college and university leavers. Since then the usual impossible project of educating ourselves out of recession was repropounded, alongside apprenticeships that most employers do not require and which are often so degraded as to be indistinguishable from workfare.

Gove and Willetts / Willetts and Gove

Gove and Willetts however recognize more clearly than their critics that because education cannot meet employment aspirations its main purpose has become social control over youth. They therefore seek to tighten the selection of a minority through cramming for more academic exams. They peddle illusions that

reintroducing a grammar school curriculum will restart the limited upward social mobility that existed in a growing post-war economy and developing welfare state and they blame comprehensive schools for bringing this period to an end. Today though, an expanded 'middle-working class' of non-manual, lower-managerial, professional reduced to paraprofessional, service workers is no longer insulated from downward social mobility.

In a class structure going pear-shaped, the academic failure of the large majority is a recipe for more riots. Hence the desperate efforts to cobble together 'apprenticeships' that employers do not need. Willetts and Gove think these will accommodate all the wrong sort of people who have gone to the wrong sorts of university but such an abandonment of mass tertiary education and reversion to the previous mass secondary era is unprecedented. So too is the privatization that the Coalition are building on New Labour's previous marketization of institutions. Gove has made clear his intention that 'free schools' and academies independent of the residual local authorities will be opened to private investment for profit should Cameron win a second term. He also reportedly favours vouchers as a way of making parents pay for more than basic schooling, while for Willetts adult, further and higher fees already act as *de facto* vouchers.

This is another first at which this deadly duo are aiming – for England to be the first country to go beyond its habitual *kowtowing* to the private schools and abandon state for private education altogether. Already, English education and training exemplifies Thatcher's new market-state in which power contracts to the centre whilst responsibility is contracted out to semi-privatised state and state-subsidised private 'delivery units', as schools, colleges and universities have become. As in the rest of a post-welfare society, the state-subsidised private sector of education dominates the semi-privatised state sector in a new mixed economy which reduces citizens to consumers.

Rather than helping young people 'move up', inflated educational qualifications are now essential to avoid downward social mobility. It is the absence of work, particularly the disappearance of specific 'youth jobs' that has been the reason for young people staying in full-time education for longer; not because most employment has become generally more demanding – in fact, the opposite is the case.

The corrosion of education

Given the lack of alternatives, it is no wonder so many school and college leavers still apply to universities, although there has been a significant fall, particularly in older applicants. Perhaps this explains why many Million+ institutions are badly down – especially the hardest hit everywhere humanities, social sciences and modern languages but also business studies. Yet many applicants have little interest in what they study beyond the prospects it offers for employment. So they remove themselves from any meaningful involvement in learning: 'Let's make like I give a shit!' as a student T-shirt proclaims. At worst staff join the charade of quality they supposedly maintain.

Education is thus losing its validity as a way forward for the younger generations. Unconnected to possibilities for practice, displaying knowledge for assessment has replaced learning. This simulacrum of study disguises the decline in achievement all teachers recognize. These realities were ignored in the recent furore over arbitrarily raised GCSE exam grades.

Conclusion

Despite all of the above, many educationists continue to assume the more qualifications possessed by the population, the greater the national economic benefit. While most graduate salaries are well below the recent Association of Graduate Recruiters' survey figure of £26,500 average for leading graduate employers, having a degree still improves an individual's *relative* position in the jobs queue. That students will not be required to make any loan repayments until they earn £21,000 – a figure close to the median wage – is also a key contributory factor.

Perhaps this explains why many Million+ institutions are badly down – particularly in the hardest hit everywhere humanities, social sciences and modern languages but also business studies. One cost effect seems to have been that if you're going to pay so much for a degree, you may as well go away for 'the full university experience', little though this often has to do with formal study. Even where cost

savings are more substantial, it seems that HE in FE has not picked up.

With numbers of AAB+ applicants also down – because it seems exam boards were required to consider ‘comparative outcomes’ to restrict top passes (shades of GCSE!) – many of the Russell Group were forced into clearing. Meanwhile the Real Russells continued reducing their undergraduate intake to increase demand and leave them more time for research. Collusion in these practices should be exposed by those campaigning for a public education. Involving students and their teachers together in reflecting upon and critiquing their educational experiences is the only way to combat the corrosion of learning at all levels.

This raises, as Liam Burns, President of NUS does (in Coiffait 2012), *The idea of a tertiary education system*, looking to Scotland ‘to stop seeing progression as linear, only ever moving up the scale of educational levels’; instead, combining F&HE. These ideas are not new but need developing to reorganise the local, regional and national provision of education and training that has been fragmented and then centralised by the new market-state.

This is the wider context as well as the historical perspective with which to confront the current assault upon English public education.

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Patrick Ainley and **Martin Allen** are co-authors of *Lost Generation? New Strategies for youth and education*. London: Continuum 2010. They blog at <http://radicaled.wordpress.com/>

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