

EDUCATION FOR 21ST CENTURY BUSINESS

Sir Stuart Rose and John May

“Great Britain is falling behind its European competitors because of the failure of its education system to keep pace with the extent of change in industry.”

It reads like a headline from a recent edition of the Today programme, but it is actually an extract from the 1884 Samuelson Committee’s report on the state of Britain’s technical education.

Ever since then, and quite possibly before, generations of interested parties have debated the role of education in preparing young people for the world of work: what sorts of skills, behaviours and attitudes do employers need to see in the next generation? What should business itself be doing to make a difference?

The debate continues. For the last twenty-five years, Business in the Community, HRH The Prince of Wales’s organisation dedicated to campaigning for responsible business, has championed forging closer links between the worlds of commerce and education.

Successive governments have set up task forces, committees and commissions to examine what young people should know about the world of work and just how they might learn it. A whole industry has grown up to broker partnerships between business and education.

And yet many schools continue to mistrust the motives of businesses who offer to support pupils’ learning. Many employers continue to complain about the work readiness of their newest recruits, and countless young people struggle to work out what they want to do in life.

Three challenges face us in delivering a credible system of education – credible for employers and for students and their families:

- Tackling our long held cultural scepticism about vocational education.
- Coming to accept that the world for which we are preparing young people looks nothing like the world we knew even five years ago
- Beginning to explore the possibility that schools and education may need to undergo a massive revolution

The challenges are, of course, interlinked.

Can the British ever value a vocational education as highly as a purely academic one? It isn't as if we haven't tried to put job-related courses into the mainstream of secondary schools before. We know that we need to engage and motivate pupils who don't find academic programmes relevant. We also know that there's a growing deficit in employment skills. Business in the Community has estimated that within ten years, the UK could have a shortfall of nearly 50% in its skilled taskforce across craft, technical and practical skills. This is a shaming statistic in a country boasting generations of compulsory education, and one which poses some demanding challenges for us all.

There has been a recent move to create a new qualification to blur the edges between academic and vocational study. This has been presented as the third of three equally meritorious routes: academic (GCSE, A-level, university) work based (apprenticeships) and a middle way, the Diploma, preparation either for employment or for entry to higher education.

This is not an entirely new approach. There have been work based programmes in schools for many years, including those offered by the vocational award bodies, RSA, City & Guilds and BTEC, such as Foundation Programmes and CPVE.

Given the time lag for any qualification to become recognised and respected, it is hard to see that the Diploma has really been given much of a chance. There is already talk of scrapping it, or at the very least organising a massive overhaul.

The fault lies not with the qualification itself, but with the way in which it is viewed by society. We have to change our attitude towards any qualification pathway that is not the "gold standard" A level. We have to avoid treating it as a ghetto for the least able or as an educational or career cul-de-sac.

The world of work is changing. Our parents were prepared for careers that involved, for most of them, one job for life. Our generation tends to stick to one industry sector throughout its career, even if we change specific jobs several times. We cannot predict what the pattern for young people now in school will

be, though it seems likely that they may move roles even more often than we do, interact globally and undertake jobs that have not yet even been invented.

The linked revolutions of developing technology, globalisation of markets, changing demographics and shifting personal values all contribute to ensuring that the adult world of today's school children will be very different from our own.

One thing we can say without any difficulty is that we are already living in a time of profound change – and the speed and extent of this change is going to intensify. We live in exponential times. The rate of technological change is seismic. We need to create flexible, resilient learners with the skills to enable them to cope well in a fast changing world.

If we are going to change our attitudes to education, if we're going to cope with the revolutions of change that are affecting our world, then we believe that we have re-engineer our education system.

We have got to stop seeing schools as separate entities and the teaching profession as a closed vocation. If you took a 19th Century doctor into a modern hospital they would be amazed at how things have changed in 100 years. We have had the discovery of penicillin, of DNA, of anti virals.

If you took a 19th Century teacher into most schools, they would see a scene not dissimilar from that which they themselves experienced. Serried ranks of young people being tutored by an individual, imparting knowledge.

We are fast entering a state of crisis in getting enough people to teach those young people. If we continue to run schools as we do currently, there could be an enormous shortfall by 2016.

We need a more flexible use of people supporting young people's learning, drawn from beyond school boundaries. There are examples of this happening already, but they are examples we haven't yet capitalised upon or built to scale.

Travel to West London and to British Airways' teaching centre in the grounds of their head offices. There you'll find employees, usually, but not exclusively, cabin crew, working with language students in aircraft mock ups, getting the students to use their modern foreign languages in real work situations.

Or visit the schools supported by the charity Young Enterprise and see business volunteers going into schools weekly, offering students direct

experience of enterprise through working together to run their own real company.

Or go to the companies like M&S that are now beginning to host sixth form students through programmes like those run by Career Academies UK, providing young people with real projects that develop their understanding of business, and give them the chance to practise their employability skills and raise their aspirations.

Or, actually, go to any Education Business Partnership in the country – and its manager will show you similar examples of innovation and learning.

What they cannot show you yet, despite the work of several task forces and business-led campaigns, is a truly systematic approach by government to supporting such work, or a genuine proven commitment to providing resources to enable this good practice to build and spread.

We know that business benefits enormously from getting involved in education. The benefits include:

- Staff development and learning
- The chance to innovate in a safe environment
- The opportunity to bring energy, enthusiasm and openness into the company
- The opportunities that exist to support staff recruitment and retention
- Gaining and retaining new customers
- The chance to improve the firm's image in the community

But, whilst the rationale is sound, is there really enough interest or commitment – from schools and business – to build such partnerships to real scale?

Our vision of the 21st Century school is one where businesses have an essential role to play in providing part time support for various parts of the curriculum, often working with small groups of students rather than whole tutor groups.

It is one where many of the students receive support from mentors, often via email as well as at 1:1 meetings. Teaching staff spend time on placements within companies, skilling themselves up in preparation for extended stays in industry and commerce or ensuring that their own teaching is up to date.

Liberating Learning; Widening Participation

It is a vision where volunteers' enthusiasm, knowledge and real-life experiences enrich students' learning, helping them to understand the world of work, raise aspirations and prepare for their future. It is one where, at the same time, the volunteers also share in the learning experience, exploring and developing their own skills and knowledge alongside the students.

It is also one where all young people learn the basics about how business works, so that they can interact with commerce, as consumers, employees or employers when they are adults. Where all young people have the opportunity to develop the skills, behaviours and attitudes needed to take a constructive place in society, recognising that, for the vast majority, that means being prepared for the world of work. Where all young people get excellent advice, information and guidance, so that they can make effective decisions about the pathways they want to follow as they embark on their quite possibly unpredictable careers.

What will need to have happened to achieve this vision? The government and the private sector will both have committed long term resources to recognising the power of business and will have funded an effective brokering service for schools and companies who want to work together.

The very spirit of education is to make things happen – the challenge is to ride the waves of change and not to be overwhelmed by them.