

POLICY WATCH

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What do the recent OECD Reports say about the UK education system?

Over the last few months the [OECD](#) (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has produced some pretty important Reports. Their [survey](#) of the UK economy which as the Chancellor solemnly put it "*revised down growth forecasts,*" led to widespread headlines over the summer. Closer to education, another summer Report, '[Jobs for Youth: United Kingdom](#)' offered an important critique of an issue that has risen high up the policy agenda, namely how best to help disengaged young people: "*recent reforms are responding to the challenge but more needs to be done.*"

Two further Reports on education have recently added to the picture; both are important in current circumstances. One is an Economics Dept Working Paper on '[Raising Education Achievement and Breaking the Cycle of Inequality in the UK](#),' two blood red issues for the price of one and the other is that annual table thudder, the 500 page '[Education at a Glance](#)' Report now for 2008.

For those less familiar with [OECD Reports](#), they provide objective analysis of Government policy and locate it within an international context, measure up how we are doing against others in effect, or as the Secretary General more eruditely put it, '*they allow us to measure strengths and fragilities of country's systems such as those of education and look at them through the lenses of policies planned, implemented and achieved in other countries.*' Politicians may rush to seize some of the credit when Reports are favourable, "*the OECD has confirmed that we are targeting investment well and sticking with policies that work*" the Schools Minister commented as '[Education at a Glance](#)' was released last week, but unlike Government Papers, OECD Reports are partisan free zones. They can even be read in other languages for those still able to study one.

The Economics Dept Paper on '[Raising education achievement and breaking the cycle of inequality](#)' is a follow-up to a Paper produced last year and looks in particular at two key problems: how the compulsory education system is helping raise skill levels and how far it still "*perpetuates rather than breaks the cycle of inequality.*" The scenario is familiar: strong employment growth in highly skilled professions, low-skilled jobs disappearing and moderately skilled jobs, for those who like a new idiom, being "*hollowed out*" by "*offshoring and computerisation.*"

The Paper identifies five "*challenges facing the education system in England.*" Few come as a surprise, indeed in all fairness Government has spent much of the last 10 years coming up with ways of trying to tackle them. How far they have succeeded can perhaps be gauged by this Paper, it's as straight an education report as you could get, even to the extent of confronting head-on a number of current Government policies.

The first challenge is low secondary school completion rates. The Paper praises the Government's Education Maintenance Allowance Scheme for encouraging more young people to stay on despite the fact that the Conservatives claimed recently that it wasn't helping everyone. But the Paper is not convinced by another Government policy, that of raising the compulsory participation age; *"it may be better to introduce compulsion only for those pupils who have not achieved a certain minimum standard of core skills."* The trouble with this is that it makes staying on seem like a punishment rather than an opportunity.

Second, poor levels of adult literacy. Government met its 2004 and 2007 targets for Skills for Life and is on course for its 2010 target but according to the Paper has some way to go in international league terms. The next major international testing window is 2011 is clearly an important date. The third and fourth are inter linked: primary school reading performance, which the Paper says *"is showing no sign of improvement"* and *'dispersed'* performance, meaning great gulfs between the top and bottom performers in the core subjects. This summer's Key Stage 2 results of just a one percentage point increase in reading, writing and maths, seem to support these concerns. The Paper believes that two of the Government's current high - profile policies don't help here: undue reliance on testing and targets and misappropriation of school choice. It believes the latter has been hijacked by the *"well informed and confident"* and that resources should be re - directed, perhaps through a voucher system, to the less well off. Expect to hear more of this around the Party fringes.

Fifth, *'intergenerational social mobility is lower in the UK than in many other OECD countries such as the Nordic countries, Australia and Canada.'* HE, unwittingly, appears as both villain and saviour here. Villain because its expanded opportunities in the 1980s were snaffled up by those from *'better - off'* backgrounds thus reinforcing income differentials across generations and saviour because if, and it's proving a big if, more children from lower socio - economic backgrounds can *"receive an education that better prepares them for HE"* then their chances of going on to university and improving their earning potential will help increase mobility. It's not an argument that has convinced everyone.

Many of the above issues surfaced in the regular survey of education participation, attainment and spending across the OECD countries known as *'Education at a Glance'* or rather at a gasp given the voluminous amount of data provided.

Findings are generally consistent with those of previous years: continuing strength in HE completion rates and earnings advantage; heavy reliance on assessment and evaluation to raise school performance; high levels of spending on primary and higher education though less so on secondary; an increase in private sources of funding; large class sizes at primary level; long school hours; poor staying on rates.

Perhaps three messages stand out. First that as the Secretary - General put it in introducing the Report, *'money is not a guarantee for better outcomes, policies are'* and some of the UK's policies such as starting school so young and relying on regular testing are at variance with those of other OECD countries. Second that growing participation in higher education, while a *'good'* thing raises long - term questions about how to fund and how to maintain quality. And third that education remains the best ticket there is for the future, both for individuals and for countries, but worryingly the gap between those who have bought the ticket and those who can't is growing.

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