

Campaign for Real Education

www.cre.org.uk

“Freedom to teach, freedom to learn, freedom to choose”

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Newsletter

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01. Editorial

The Campaign for Real Education has long called for a Royal Commission to report on the state of education across the UK. This has not been forthcoming. The Times newspaper, however, has, commendably, taken the initiative by setting up its own commission of inquiry.

Its final report, published on June 15th, the commissioners conclude that our education system is failing on multiple fronts. This conclusion is endorsed by two former prime ministers and by ten former secretaries of state for education.

Coming from the architects of the failure, this endorsement is not necessarily reassuring. It is, nevertheless, a welcome recognition of reality and, indeed, an unintended affirmation of the CRE's position over several decades.

The full report can be read here:

<https://nuk-tnl-editorial-prod-staticassets.s3.amazonaws.com/2022/education-commission/Times%20Education%20Commission%20final%20report.pdf>

The proposals of the Commission for improvement address some important educational issues. These include greater breadth within both the curriculum and the examination system. The need to expand and to improve vocational education is also accepted. In addition, there is recognition of the huge importance of early years learning.

Less wise, perhaps, is the call for an extra fifty university campuses. We are already over-supplied with debt-burdened, under-employed graduates with degrees of little value. Equally, the commission's blind faith in digital technology, including a tablet for every child, lacks a sense of proportion. Many children are already addicted to their devices. Upping the dose is akin to prescribing a form of educational cocaine.

At times, too, the report is disingenuous. It boldly states, for example, that 3% is the Estimated rise in education spending from 2010 to 2025. It fails to add that in the preceding decades [1953-2009], spending on education increased by close to 900 per cent in real terms [Crawford, Emmerson and Tetlow, A survey of Public Spending in the UK, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2009, p22].

This massive increase in educational spending appears to have been accompanied by a decline in educational standards. The report admits, though, that Estonia has achieved 'the best education system in Europe' and 'among the top countries in the world', 'Despite relatively low spending.'

The Commission's report takes up 96 pages in telling us how to improve our education system. Two words would have sufficed – "good teaching".

The commission approach is an educational version of saturation bombing. Sometimes its report does, indeed, hit the target and that is to be welcomed. Too, often, though it is PR rhetoric that shines through in such platitudes as:

No school is an island

It is much better for society to build stronger children than to repair broken men

You've got to have time to dream

For any society nothing matters more than the children, the seedcorn of its future

You don't excite people with lots and lots of facts

Adolescence is a time of profound change

For a tired teacher facing a disruptive class of children on a Friday afternoon, such banalities are unlikely to be of much help. There is a sizeable gap between generating rhetoric for change and its classroom implementation. I recall a staff meeting at the end of the first week of my thirty-five years' teaching career. It was in a successful comprehensive school of two thousand pupils. My enlightened headteacher began the meeting by telling the assembled teacher something they all knew – "TGFF" [Thank God for Friday].

I am not sure that all twenty-three commissioners would understand that acronym but every teacher worth his or her salt, up and down the land, probably would. And that is the fatal flaw of the Times Report which describes itself as the 'broadest inquiry into education ever held in Britain.'

The educational background of the newspaper's twenty-three commissioners was not broad enough. Of the sixteen whose schooling the CRE has been able to ascertain, only one attended a state comprehensive school.

Three are products of state grammar schools. The remaining twelve commissioners, 75 per cent, were educated in private schools, including: Eton,

Westminster, Oxford High School for Girls, University College School and King's Canterbury. The 'Chairwoman' was a pupil at South Hampstead High School for Girls and the 'Deputy chairman' is an ex-Tonbridge School, boy.

Nor is breadth particularly evident in the universities attended by the commissioners unless one sees such breadth in having graduates from Cambridge as well as from

Oxford. Of the sixteen commissioners whose university can be identified, six are graduates of the former and five of the latter.

Diversity of experience amongst members is important for any commission of inquiry and most of all, perhaps, for an inquiry into education. The Commission will argue that it has trawled very widely in seeking opinion.

It was unwise, however, to present conclusions from such a narrow base of commissioner experience. This is a shame because some of the conclusions of the Commission deserve serious consideration. Until you fully understand “TGFF”, however, you will never be in the best position to tell teachers where they are going wrong.

Educational background of the 23 Times education commissioners

1. Rachel Sylvester [‘chairperson’]: privately educated + Oxford
2. Sir Anthony Seldon [‘vice-chairman’]: privately educated + Oxford
3. Geoff Barton: unknown
4. Lord Bilimoria: privately funded school in India + Cambridge
5. Sarah-Jayne Blakemore: privately educated + Cambridge
6. Sir Damon Buffini: grammar school + Cambridge
7. Dame Sally Coates: unknown
8. Evelyn Forde: unknown
9. Kiran Gill: unknown
10. Robert Halfon: privately educated + Exeter
11. Lucy Heller: unknown
12. Tristram Hunt: privately educated + Cambridge
13. Lord Johnson of Marylebone: privately educated + Oxford
14. Paul Johnson: state comprehensive + Oxford
15. Lucy Kellaway: privately educated + Oxford
16. Baroness Lane-Fox: privately educated + Oxford
17. Anne Longfield: grammar school + Newcastle
18. Professor Heather McGregor: unknown + Newcastle
19. Amanda Melton: unknown + London
20. Sir Michael Morpurgo: privately educated + London
21. Lord Rees of Ludlow: privately educated + Cambridge
22. Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell: grammar school + London
23. Sir Tim Smit: privately educated + Durham

Summary

7/23 [30%] Unknown schooling
3/16 [19%] Grammar School
15/16 [94%] Private or grammar school.

1/16 [6%] State comprehensive
12/16 [75%] Privately educated

Over several decades the Campaign for Real Education has raised concerns over the issues now being highlighted by The Times Commission. Belated and derivative as it may be in parts, we welcome the new report. What matters most, however, is not words but action. This will, ultimately, depend on the quality of teaching at all levels across our education system.

Chris McGovern

Chairman

02. The 2022 Schools Bill - the Blob Strikes Back!

The 2022 Schools Bill has been introduced into Parliament through the House of Lords. Its full title is:

A Bill To Make provision for the regulation of Academies; about school and local education funding; about the attendance of children at school; about the regulation of independent educational institutions; about teacher misconduct; and for connected purposes

The text of the Bill is very important and deserves close scrutiny. In its current form it will undermine the partial decentralisation of our school system that has been brought about by the academy/free school programme. Under the guise of extending this programme to all schools, the bill transfers real power to the Department for Education. Academies/free schools currently have a large measure of control over their curriculum, their admissions, their staffing and their spending. The Bill transfers ultimate authority for these key areas of school management to the Department.

Even former Education Secretary, Lord Baker, a prime mover in creating the educational shambles we see around us today, has been able to spot the Blob's power grab. He told the Lords that it was 'quite amazing' that ministers had agreed to some of the Bill's provisions.

It is a law as immutable as that defining gravity that in educational debate the educational establishment, the so-called 'Blob', always wins. Small wonder, then, that our education system continues to fall into an abyss of widespread under-performance.

03. Trigger Warnings

A number of woke-addicted universities are publishing trigger warnings to students about course content. Archaeology students at York University, for example, have been warned that they may not be able to cope when they come across images of bones and human remains. They will, presumably, be able to opt out of those parts of the course and/or receive counselling.

English literature courses are blighted most of all, though, with some universities attaching trigger warning to Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, and a host of other writers.

Such warnings do not infantilise young adults as some commentators claim.

<https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/archaeology-students-trigger-warning-dead-bodies/>

Infants traditionally survive and thrive on been exposed to far tougher material, via fairy tales.

Murder, torture, decapitation and cannibalism were all fair game for the Brothers Grimm. A giant seeks to kill beanstalk-Jack in order to make bread from his bones.

Hansel and Gretel meet up with a cannibalistic witch and, in Little Red Riding Hood, poor granny is eaten alive by a wolf. Nor are these the most horror-laden tales.

Is it cruel to present such tales to infants? Our educational establishment seems to think so. These age-old stories are now being diluted and sanitised to make them politically correct and woke.

The whole point of them, however, and, indeed, of nursery rhymes, is to introduce children to the good and evil in the world, to prepare them for life. They are the best trigger warnings of all.

Knowledge of the Brothers Grimm should, perhaps, be added to university entrance requirements and they should, certainly, be read at both home and at school.

04. 'The End of Marking?

Only 42 per cent of teachers now mark pupils' work. This is the finding of research by Teacher Tapp, a daily survey app for teachers. The figure represents a significant fall compared to 2018 when 61 per cent of teachers claimed to mark pupils' work. The fall at secondary level between 2018 and 2022 is even more dramatic – from 71 per cent to 41 per cent.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10907707/Schools-scrapping-marking-policies-fears-work-burden-staff.html>

One of its teachers explained that pupils had been “learning about the importance of breaking down gender stereotypes” and “we’d love everyone to get involved.” The school has claimed, rather disingenuously, that its show of solidarity for events in Spain was pupil-generated.

In a statement quoted in news reports in the UK and in a number of countries overseas, the CRE observed that adults were ‘foisting their own anxieties on to children’, who should simply be taught to treat others as they would want to be treated themselves.

<https://news-24.fr/lecole-ecossaise-demande-aux-garcons-et-aux-enseignants-de-porter-des-jupes-pendant-une-journee-dessine-flak/>

Neil Oliver, the well-known Scottish TV presenter and journalist, told *The Sunday Times*:

Education standards in Scotland are falling faster than a piano tipped out of a window and yet, rather than focus on giving pupils the skills they need in life, agitators, grifters and troublemakers prefer petty virtue-signalling at children's expense.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: leave the children alone.

05. Promoting the Nationalist Agenda in Scottish Classrooms

A 34-page study aid, issued by North Lanarkshire council and being promoted in Scottish schools has been condemned as, in effect, little more than SNP political propaganda. Lindsay Paterson, professor of education policy at Edinburgh University has concluded that:

The information gives a very biased view of the way in which the Scottish government, the Scottish parliament and Scottish democracy work. It is so one-sided as to be seriously misleading and ought not to be used for teaching in any educational institution.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/expert-condemns-pro-independence-study-aid-with-16-photos-of-nicola-sturgeon-and-other-snp-politicians-btzzbtlft>

The 'modern studies' booklet for first year secondary pupils presents a number of nationalist slogans and sixteen photographs of Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's First Minister and other SNP politicians. This is 'balanced' by single picture of a Labour politician.

Meanwhile, Education Scotland, an executive agency of the Scottish government, has recruited the Loch Ness Monster to promote the nationalist message. Educational materials sent to Scottish schools teach children that the monster is a symbol of British domination and control over Scotland.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/nessie-is-symbol-of-british-control-pupils-will-be-told-zqp5v6c9b>

06. Oxbridge Entrance and the Deprivation Gap

The CRE has long argued that entry to our leading universities should be based on merit and not on meeting targets for social engineering. Discriminating against independent schools in order to boost state school intake is unfair and short-sighted. It is also likely to be damaging to our economy if better educated young people pursue higher education and employment overseas.

Access to a good state school is, in any case, mostly based on the ability of parents to purchase a house in the catchment area of that school. Selection on the basis of

income determines access to state schools as much as it does to independent schools. The better-off also benefit from the fact that most surviving grammar schools are in affluent areas.

Cambridge Vice-Chancellor, Stephen Toope, has indicated that at his university there will be a continuing reduction of independent school entrants. Oxford has the same intention. At Cambridge, state school intake increased from 62.3 per cent to 70 per cent between 2015 and 2020 and from 55.6 per cent to 68.7 per cent at Oxford.

It is no longer possible for A-level results to pick out the most able pupils. 44 per cent are now graded at the A-A* level. This makes it much easier for universities to increase their intake of state school pupils. In terms of 'social justice', however, discriminating in favour of state schools makes little, if any difference. Only better teaching and consequent higher standards in deprived areas will attain that goal.

The deprivation gap within the state sector is far wider than the gap between good state schools and independent schools. Over the past eight years, for example, Salford in the North-West sent eight pupils to Oxbridge and Sandwell in the West Midlands sent just five.

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/children-deprived-areas-let-down-26508893>

07. The Loneliness of Long-Distance Learning

A survey of over 10,000 students, carried out by the Higher Education Policy Institute, has discovered some highly concerning data regarding the mental health of these young adults. 59 per cent admitted that they are lonely most of the time, all of the time, or at least once a week. Of these, around 25 per cent feel lonely most or all of the time compared to 5 per cent of the general population.

This data has appeared against a background of only 35 per cent of students saying their course was good or very good value for money. The deployment of online teaching during the pandemic has continued widely although 'lockdown' came to an end some months ago.

Writing as a concerned parent, in the next article, Paul Wiltshire lifts the lid on what is going on.

08. Universities Are Attempting To Normalise Online Teaching Post-Covid – and They Are Winning

Paul Wiltshire - Parent

Two of my sons are at universities that announced in July 21, that despite the fact that Covid restrictions did not prohibit face-to-face teaching, they were going to be sticking with online lectures.

I immediately suspected that this wasn't just a sensible excess of Covid caution, as was being suggested, but was more a bid for a permanent change to an online teaching delivery method.

I quickly discovered that my son's experience was far from isolated, and that the vast majority of universities were making similar decisions to continue to deliver substantial levels of online teaching.

What has followed has been a 9-month campaign where I have attempted to raise awareness of the issue to those in power.

From a standing start, when I knew precious little about UK University governance, I can now claim to be the only person in the UK who has read several times all of the information on the 146 university websites regarding their post-pandemic teaching intentions, have compiled several research data based on my findings, have carried out extensive mystery shops posing as a prospective student, read all the media articles on this issue, contributed to many national articles myself and interacted with numerous other 'players' in this field.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/02/04/university-fat-cats-have-abandoned-students/>

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/04/01/universities-still-teaching-online-amid-pressure-transparent/>

The outcome of this 'battle' will have profound effects on our whole society's perception of how education should be delivered, not just Universities.

If we cross the Rubicon whereby, we accept that online teaching at university has equivalence and is interchangeable with face-to-face teaching, then it won't only affect university education, it will seep through to all areas of education.

Why bother having a 'real' teacher in any form of education if you can have virtual one via a screen? Yet I, and other campaigners, have so far failed to 'lay a finger' on those Universities intent on staying substantially online.

The Universities are winning because they are being allowed to hide what is really going on. From my regular sweep of the 146 UK University websites, I would estimate that around 70-80% of universities are delivering some form of blended learning, which involves online teaching to a certain extent.

But this is only based on the general, vague and often misleading data which is all that is being made available; there is no detailed course-by-course data about whether a current or prospective student can expect online teaching or face-to-face on their particular course and to what extent.

I have presented this research time and time again to the Office for Students, Department for Education, Education Select Committee and Government ministers, yet none of them has done anything about it. How on earth can it be acceptable that students as consumers are expected to pay £28k for a three-year course, yet the Universities feel no obligation or duty to actually let them know what service they can expect and are instead actively denying them the ability to make an informed choice.

The Universities know that if they give prospective students the ability to make an informed choice, via UCAS, that clearly differentiates between those courses delivered largely online, and those fully face-to-face, then those students, particularly when helped and advised by their parents, are going to overwhelmingly choose fully face-to-face. Thus is why Universities are avoiding transparency at all costs, and they are being allowed to do so.

In January of this year it was announced in The Times that Nadhim Zahawi was indeed going to force Universities to be transparent about online teaching, but since then nothing has been done, and it is now becoming too late for the 2022-2023 intake. My theory is that even when he made these comments, he already knew that this would be too much of a battle with universities to ever achieve it and had no intention of following through on his rhetoric.

And what about the existing students who signed up to their courses prior to Covid, or during Covid lockdowns, when there was actually nothing on university websites that gave them any indication whatsoever that they should not expect a full return to face-to-face teaching when restrictions were lifted?

They have had no choice at all when Universities unilaterally decided to stay online on Sept 21. Their consumer rights, to receive the fully face-to-face service they signed up for, have been completely ignored. They have been told that their remedy lies with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator complaint process, but this process often takes a whole academic year before reaching a decision, and not a single complaint by any student relating to this issue for academic year 2021-2022 has yet been decided.

This is hardly the remedy required, then, to resolve this issue that is affecting around one million students.

The Office for Students has announced a review into Blended Learning that won't be released until this Summer. Since the start of the pandemic, the Office for Students have been very sympathetic, bordering on being actively supportive of the notion being spread by Universities UK, the Russell Group, University Alliance etc, that online teaching is somehow progressive, efficient, convenient and is the future.

I am fearful therefore that rather than this report being an expose of the lack of transparency and the questionable overall quality of online teaching and detriment to the overall student experience, it will actually be an Instruction Manual for how Universities can stay online as it suits them and with the Office for Students full endorsement.

And the announcement of this report is being used by the politicians, most recently Michelle Donelan, as an excuse to continue to do absolutely nothing themselves about this problem.

But whatever way online teaching is 'dressed-up' by its advocates, it involves young adults being confined to their bedrooms, alone and isolated, often watching lectures in batches at irregular hours. Nobody is ever going to convince me that this is a good thing for their education or their overall well-being.

Wider society needs to take this issue seriously. The prophetic quote below, from over 100 years ago, about a dystopian future where humans live alone in pods and only interact via screens, serves as a warning to us that we shouldn't blindly take a one-way ticket into this new normal.

"Then she switched off her correspondents, for it was time to deliver her lecture on Australian music.

The clumsy system of public gatherings had been long since abandoned; neither Vashti nor her audience stirred from their rooms.

Seated in her armchair she spoke, while they in their armchairs heard her, fairly well, and saw her, fairly well"

EM Forster - The Machine Stops 1909

09. No Comment

Why are books on the English school curriculum still in the grip of straight, white men?

Guardian 7.6.22

A leading university has slapped trigger warnings on “insults” and swear words – for students studying the English language.

Daily Telegraph 11.6.22

Scotland’s biggest teaching union has agreed to campaign for a four-day working week.

TES 10.6.22

Shanghai is aiming to attract global talent from some of the world’s best universities by immediately granting them the hard-to-get household registration document known as the hukou . . .

Sixth Tone 8.6.22

Some primary school pupils unable to say their names. . .

Times 13.6.22

Students ‘thrown off’ and ‘upset’ after A-level exam blunder missed out Shakespeare questions

Independent 10.6.22