Trends in British education
Excellence under strain?

CONTRIBUTORS
Robert Leach • David J. Hutchinson • Jannike E. Berger • Christina Solli
Alan Smithers • Sarah Ebner • Øivind Bratberg
Editorial
British education: conservation and reform

Education is the catchword of many a political debate on how to improve and thrive in a global economy. The precise nature of those competitive skills may be hard to pin down; in Britain, the debate encompasses both primary, secondary and higher education.

In higher education the international market is a daily reference. British universities compete hard for students, staff and resources, in an environment which is unlikely to be more benign with the tightening of public finances. At the global level, Britain remains remarkably successful, with seven universities listed in the top 30 of the world (of which four in the top six) according to the THE global rankings for 2009. The breadth of high-quality research in Britain is without equal in Europe. Beyond gilded tradition, willingness to renew and reform is prevalent – indeed, such renewal runs deep into the individual academic disciplines. British Politics is one such field of study which is faced with competition from new thematic interests, be it in the form of environmental policy, terrorism or European governance. Moreover, as accounted for by Robert Leach in the present issue of the Review, British Politics is also a field which is running to keep pace with a changing Britain, in a changing world.

Education policy also reflects a debate over how persisting class divisions should be rectified. Enforcing equality of opportunity is politically sensitive, involving issues such as quotas and positive discrimination. However, the basic idea of enabling poorer pupils and students to succeed prevails across the political scene; when the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 was seen to bar poorer students from higher education, it showed a broadly shared concern that British universities should reward talent rather than class.

Well may improving overall standards and encouraging social mobility form a fragile consensus in British education policy, but the ways in which this should be done remain contested. Is the solution more of the centralised regulation, testing and targeting, or less? Alan Smithers, in his article for the present issue, makes the case for quality through decentralised, thoughtful tuition rather than by succumbing to national targets and tests. The centralist impulse of British politics has often meant that improvement is sought by national standards rather than autonomy and local judgement: the debate over autonomy and flexibility is sure to be one of the battlefields of the coming election campaign.

The present issue of British Politics Review touches upon a number of these trends. Rather than aspiring to an exhaustive analysis, then, the following pages give a hint of issues and debates from the broad canvas of British education.

Olavind Bratberg and Kristin M. Haugevik, Editors

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Writing about British politics in an age of transition

By Robert Leach

A moving target.

Studying, teaching and writing about British politics has lately become more challenging. British politics once appeared a model of stability and continuity. Political developments over forty years coupled with more recent constitutional reforms suggest a different, uncertain future, although it remains unclear which changes will appear lasting and which transient. Certainly the traditional British system of government, sometimes described as the Westminster model, is now contentious.

The “Westminster model” is commonly traced back to Bagehot’s 19th century analysis of what he was pleased to call the English constitution. Today it is taken to involve some governmental principles bound up with Britain’s uncodified and largely unwritten constitution, such as the unitary state, parliamentary sovereignty, and strong government based on the fusion of executive and legislative powers. It also includes elements of British political practice, such as the two party system and single party majority governments, both assisted (but not necessarily produced) by a disproportionate electoral system.

Yet a full federal system presents problems. England, with 86% of the UK population, cannot easily become a state within a federation. Nationalists in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland favour another solution, involving sovereign independence for the non-English territories of Britain, and a united Irish Republic. This may happen, if it becomes the settled preference of most of their inhabitants. A shrunken English state would vanish in a unitary English state. A purely English parliament would no longer have its uses. Bagehot famously distinguished between the dignified and efficient elements of the constitution, but he did not consider that the dignified elements, such as the monarchy, were useless, but assisted confidence and legitimacy. Some analysts consider the Westminster model still shapes the behaviour of ministers and civil servants. Thus while key elements of the Westminster model may appear more dignified than efficient, if many, inside and outside government, continue to accept their validity, they will continue to influence the way British politics is practised.

Others may reasonably object that a focus on British government and politics is too narrow and insular in a world where the old politics of sovereign independent nation states increasingly appears anachronistic. Concerns over trade, finance, security and the environment transcend state borders and require not only increased co-operation between states but also with international organisations (both governmental and non-governmental), and trans-national corporations. At another level the protection of individuals and minorities in increasingly multi-cultural societies suggests the need to devolve powers down to communities and citizens. Politics is ultimately for people rather than states. The new politics is multi-layered, involving multi-level governance, transcending the formal institutions and associated political processes of any single state.

This is an awkward conclusion for someone whose working life has largely involved teaching and writing on the government and politics of a single state, the United Kingdom. To those whose interests and concerns are global, British politics inevitably appears parochial. Even so, there remains much to be said for the in-depth study of a particular political system, which alone can illustrate how various political institutions and levels of government interact within a complex political process. However, the politics of any one country can only be properly appreciated within a wider comparative context that can promote an understanding of both their distinctive and common features.
The teaching of British Area Studies to overseas students in a British university

By David J. Hutchinson

How are British Area Studies (BAS) provided at British universities, and what lessons could be learnt from the experience of offering such courses to overseas students? Below I offer some ideas on this matter, drawing upon the experience of organising BAS at the University of Portsmouth from 1991 to 2006.

BAS were taught in all years of the English Studies programmes followed by overseas exchange students within the School of Languages & Area Studies (SLAS) and also to French, German and Spanish students following the European Business Programme in the Portsmouth Business School (PBS).

It should be pointed out that the requirement for an area studies component emanated from the Erasmus and Socrates programmes of the EU which provided some financial support for students spending periods of residence abroad. The development of BAS units, however, owed much to the SLAS experience of developing and delivering area studies units relating to a wide range of other countries and to extensive discussions over many years with academic colleagues, too numerous unfortunately to acknowledge individually, in other European universities with which bilateral links had been made by the University of Portsmouth.

After extensive discussions at a series of international meetings, many of these academics formed the European Network for British Area Studies (ENBAS) in 2001 whose members expressed a willingness in their mission statement to promote, encourage and assist in the development of Europe-wide of BAS programmes and activities. In April 2001, ENBAS held its first international conference on the theme of Britain in a Migrant World at the University of Portsmouth. Later attempts to hold international conferences have highlighted the difficulties resulting from the lack of standardisation in European university semester dates but it is hoped that further attempts to revive such conferences may take place in the near future after discussions between the founding signatories to the ENBAS Declaration of Principles.

SLAS, originally established in 1967, became one of the largest such departments in the UK higher education sector and by 1991 had developed highly successful and popular first degree programmes in French, German, Russian, Spanish & Latin American Studies. Language and history were taught as core disciplines on all the programmes which required students to spend a period abroad following relevant courses in a university level institution. The early influx of foreign students to SLAS was the direct result of the various exchange agreements which were negotiated with a wide range of European universities but in later years overseas students were also recruited directly, mainly from Hong Kong and China.

PBS had made agreements with partner institutions in France, Germany and Spain and all recruited students internationally to the European Business Programme (EBP) in which students were required to spend semesters abroad in two foreign countries. Whilst in England, EBP students followed both English language courses and BAS in addition to their business subjects.

In very early years a fairly loosely knit British Life and Society course had been contributed to by a wide range of specialists both from within and outside SLAS but it rapidly became apparent that a much more academically coherent structure was needed. The course units were therefore extensively restructured from 1991 onwards when a historically-based approach was adopted. Units themselves were divided into components for ease of regular up-dating to ensure their contemporary relevance.

Unit types. SLAS students in their first year of study in the UK were offered introductory units in British Society and British Institutions. Second year students followed units in British Institutions and Public Policy and final year students followed, firstly a British and Comparative Institutions unit dealing with the Anglophone countries of Australia, Canada and New Zealand whose parliamentary systems had derived originally from the Westminster model. This was followed in the second semester by a unit in American Studies which focused on the political institutions of the United States and its major policy concerns.

In all cases, a historically based approach to the institutional structures was adopted. Units dealing with institutions were taught before those dealing with state policies. The units were delivered through a combination of lectures and seminars in the latter of which student participation was actively encouraged. Appropriate texts on particular institutions and policy areas were either distributed in class or students were asked to download them from the Internet prior to their being studied in the seminars. Where possible these were drawn from primary sources such as government and institutional websites, white papers and ministerial speeches announcing major policy initiatives. In the case of American Studies in particular, students were encouraged to make extensive use of documentation available on the Presidential, Congressional and Supreme Court websites. Lectures were used for the purpose of updating the knowledge students had acquired from recommended textbooks and earlier documentation studies.

Course Textbooks. Extensive use was made of the first and subsequently revised editions of Oakland (1989) British Civilization (London: Routledge) and of Mauk, D. & Oakland J. (1995) American Civilization (London: Routledge). Sections of both were prescribed reading for the relevant units.

Unit Content & Aims. In the institution-based units, the focus was primarily on the major state, governmental, educational, financial, health care and legal institutions but political parties, industrial and trade union institutions were also dealt with.

Students following institutional units in British institutions enjoy many opportunities for direct access to some of them. An extensive extra mural programme of individual, group and sometimes guided visits was organised to such institutions as Crown and Magistrates courts, financial institutions, those providing educational and health care facilities and also to local government institutions. In policy-based units, foreign, defence and immigration policies were usually prioritised because of the scope they provided for comparative study in the seminars. Devolution, educational, environmental, health and social policies were also included.

The broad general aims might be expressed as a desire to provide as comprehensive and accurate a framework as possible, within the time-scale allocated, for the understanding of contemporary Britain through a systematic study of the functioning of some of its more important institutions as they had evolved historically and through an analysis of major areas of public policy.

"Although the term ‘area studies’ is one that gained currency only in the 1960s, area studies approaches [...] certainly date back to the late nineteenth century."

David J. Hutchinson is a former Senior Lecturer in Linguistics and English Studies of the School of Languages & Area Studies, University of Portsmouth.
The teaching of British Area Studies to overseas students... (cont.)

By David J. Hutchinson

Unit Delivery. Units were delivered through a series of fairly tightly structured components, which could be individually revised on an annual or biennial basis to ensure their contemporary relevance. Briefly, a component consisted of one- or sometimes two- weekly lectures followed by a seminar designed to give individual students the maximum opportunity for participation.

Although there was a prescribed textbook for the unit, the relevant sections of which were expected to have been read before the lecture, duplicated material was distributed at the lecture and the briefing guide for the lecture recommended further press or internet articles for reading as preparation for discussion in the seminars. Lectures were used essentially for updating knowledge about institutions and policies and for discussing contemporary references to them in the various media.

Unit Components. A component-based approach had the effect of concentrating students’ attention on one topic at a time and of facilitating a multi-media presentation on a very specific institution or policy issue within a fixed period of time, usually no more than one week. The approach was highly flexible since it permitted periodic revision, addition or even removal of particular components without inflicting major lasting damage on the overall unit structure. The scope of the unit was easily extensible as was the treating of specific topics in a greater amount of depth in the light of reforms and changes currently being publicised in the media.

Increasing use was made of web-based materials and web-based learning as the delivery of the units developed during this fifteen year period.

Unit Evaluation. Although use was made of conventional essays and short tests during the semester, mainly for assessing analytical and discussion skills, the final assessment method became increasingly one which depended largely on computer marked multiple choice tests (MCTs). Whilst MCTs were not without some problems of both compilation and administration, they were rendered increasingly necessary by high student numbers and the need to test much unit content after delivery had ended. Increasing institutional practices allowed very little time for marking. Marks were required for Unit Assessment Boards and Progression Boards held before the end of the semester. Often there was either only a very short break or sometimes no break at all between semesters. MCTs, whilst they may make evaluation of certain analytical and discussion skills rather difficult, do offer the opportunity of rapidly testing assimilation of large amounts of data and some comprehension skills. They also make grading of individual students very simple and their numerical results can be scaled to suit institutional marking policies.

The Area Studies’ Historical Context in British Higher Education. It is often not appreciated that although the term “area studies” is one that gained currency only in the 1960s, area studies approaches (both to the teaching of classical languages and civilisations and to the teaching of modern foreign languages when they were eventually introduced into the university curriculum) certainly date back to the late nineteenth century. The teaching of Latin and Greek, within the public and grammar school system and in the traditional universities in England and Scotland had always had ethical, political, historical and geographical dimensions largely because of the texts studied for translation and discussion in class. When modern languages were eventually deemed suitable for study in universities, the emphasis initially was on the study of their literatures and of the history of the language rather than on the contemporary spoken language.

The case of Russian is perhaps the earliest and most interesting one. In 1889, the University of Oxford had appointed a professor whose field was Slavonic Studies. Chairs of Russian were established at the Universities of Leeds and Birmingham in 1916 and at Manchester in 1919 which was also the year in which the University of London School of Slavonic and East European Studies was founded. During the First World War there was also interest at the University of Sheffield for Russian Studies because of the steel industry connections between Sheffield and many Russian cities where steel production was economically significant. The area studies approach with an emphasis on history and economics was characteristic of all these institutions. (See Ralph Cleminson: “Russian Language and Learning: Past Present and Future: Papers from a Conference held at the University of Portsmouth April 1994”).

Decades later, Latin American Studies at post-graduate level was rapidly established in the Universities of Oxford (1964), London (1965), Cambridge (1966), Liverpool (1966) and Essex (1968) following the recommendations of the University Grants Committee Parry Report (1965). Parallel developments in other European languages, principally French and German, towards an area studies rather than a purely language and literature based approach took place in a number of the newer British universities during the 1960s.

Much of the later debate about what constituted area studies was carried out in the Journal of Area Studies, launched originally within SLAS at Portsmouth in early 1980 and later re-launched as the Journal of Contemporary European Studies in 1999. The problems of defining institutions were also touched upon by some contributors. Of particular note in the May 2003 issue are the articles by Michael Smith on "UK European Studies programmes at the Crossroads" and by John Bendix on "Language and Area Studies programmes in the United States".

The debate about definitions of civilisation, area studies and institutions and their relationship to one another will doubtless continue unabated. This notwithstanding, the balance between the components will always remain a matter for decision by individual institutions and programme co-ordinators.

The author is happy to answer questions from readers both about ENBAS and about BAS at Portsmouth. Please get in touch by writing to <dhutchinson001@hotmail.com>.

Civilisation. Encompassing the study of political institutions, a range of policy areas and contemporary societal issues, Area Studies offers a broad and cross-disciplinary field of study.
English studies seen from abroad
By Jannike Elmblom Berger

Across the North Sea.

English studies in Norway offer some advantages compared to studying English abroad. Still, some areas are not prioritised, or even neglected. Thus, there are several reasons why students should use their opportunity to go on an exchange.

For a Norwegian, there are definitely some advantages in how English studies are composed in Norway. Unlike English studies in countries where English is the native language, students at Norwegian universities have to take a course in phonetics and intonation. This gives us knowledge about different pronunciation features of standard British or American English, and the skills to use these in order to sound more like a native speaker. There are many examples of notable Norwegians in the public sphere who have been criticised for their poor English pronunciation (no names mentioned). As a student of English you will hopefully not end up in the same trap.

Furthermore, English studies in Norway offer general introductory courses on the literature and civilisation of the two most significant English-speaking countries, Britain and the USA. Such courses are rare in Britain or the USA, and where they are taught, they will not be tailored to a Norwegian audience, in the way they are at Norwegian institutions. Instead, courses on different aspects of society, such as History, Political Science or Law, are placed in their respective departments, and taught separately. The Norwegian model is very useful since it provides a common ground for all the students, and an insight into several aspects of these societies. If you are interested in a particular field, you have the opportunity to go more in-depth on higher levels. The University of Oslo, where I am a student, offers several courses on a more specialised level within language, literature and North-American studies.

While the English department offers a wide selection of courses within the areas mentioned above, other areas are not prioritised, or even neglected. In addition to the introductory course on British civilisation, the Department only offers three courses on intermediate-level courses on British topics. Furthermore, there are as many as seven researchers at North-American Studies, and only one researcher on Britain. This marginalisation of Britain as an area of study continues in the Master’s Programme. Since British civilisation is not offered as an alternative within the English Master’s degree, only as an ad-hoc solution through the Teacher Training Programme where I am a student, there are consequently no particular Master’s courses on Britain. In order to feel adequately prepared to write my Master’s thesis within my main area of interest, British civilisation, I therefore decided to go to Britain where I will be given the chance to take suitable courses. Although I appreciate the opportunity I have been given of spending next semester as an exchange student at the University of Nottingham, I would still prefer a wider range of courses at my home university.

Studying abroad provides a number of other advantages, and I would encourage Norwegian students of English to use the opportunity they have of spending at least a semester at a university in an English-speaking country. Norwegian universities have exchange programmes with universities in several countries where English is an official language, such as Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, as well as India, South Africa and Singapore.

An exchange to one of these countries would provide the students with experiences and knowledge they cannot gain to the same extent at a Norwegian university. Based on my own experiences as an exchange student in York and London, I know the significant advantage of becoming familiar with using the language on an everyday basis, orally and in writing, and in both informal and formal situations. Through your stay, and the friends you make, you will experience the culture of the country at first hand. This is something no textbook on civilisation could ever teach you. If your country of interest is not Britain or the USA, an exchange to one of these other countries is especially advisable. English studies in Norway are almost exclusively devoted to the two aforementioned countries. There are no courses on either the literature or the civilisations of countries such as Australia, New Zealand or South Africa. English is a world language, and this ought to be reflected in the English studies offered at Norwegian universities. As opposed to English at the university, the English subject in Norwegian schools emphasises English as a world language. The curriculum for the first year of the upper secondary school states that the pupils should be able to “discuss social conditions and values in various cultures in a number of English-speaking countries”. Many English students in Norway, such as me, become teachers, and I find it problematic that we are to teach topics which have not been covered in our own degrees.

An exchange to an English-speaking country could also be an advantage when it comes to teaching and assessment. Many universities abroad use continuous evaluation, where participation in class, essay writing and final exams together constitute the final mark in a course. At Norwegian universities, on the other hand, the final assessment is often based on just one written exam or essay. This system is especially disadvantageous for students of a foreign language, since there is little focus on oral skills. Except Phonetics and perhaps a few mandatory oral presentations, it is possible to go through an entire Bachelor’s degree without uttering a single word of English. Participation in class does not count as a part of the final mark, and it is rarely encouraged. Thus, most Norwegian students of English, it seems to me, are well-skilled in written English, whereas they are often more insecure when it comes to expressing themselves orally.

Perhaps this is one of the greatest challenges English studies in Norway face. Although there will always be some differences between studying language and civilisation in the country of its origin and studying it from a geographical distance, this distance could also prove to be productive. In some respects it could stimulate critical awareness. Norwegian students of English all have one great advantage: the possibility of learning the English language while at the same time observing English-speaking countries, such as Britain with all its peculiarities and eccentricities, from an outside perspective.
The inherent attraction of British higher education

By Christina Solli

Hard work, with benefits.

As a student in Britain, you become part of an 800 year long tradition of academic excellence. The combination of highly reputable universities and affordable tuition fees makes Britain one of the most popular countries for ambitious students from all over the world. According to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce), there are currently more than 350,000 international students in Britain, a figure that represents about 15 per cent of the country’s total student population. Britain is also a favoured destination for Norwegian students, and having recently completed an MSc at the London School of Economics (LSE) within European Comparative Politics, I will outline my reasons for choosing LSE and try to describe my experience of pursuing higher education in Britain.

My choice to become part of the British education system was influenced by a number of factors. Knowing that I wanted to pursue a political science degree outside of Norway, I focused on American and British universities with reputable departments in this field. Ultimately, I chose LSE because of the reputation of the Government Department and of its faculty. In addition, factors such as the English language, the proximity to Norway and the fact that the institution is well-known to potential employers in Norway also contributed to the decision. Studying in Britain was a positive experience both academically and socially. In retrospect, there are three key features which stand out from my year at LSE; the flexibility offered in the choice of courses, the challenge that the coursework presents, and the high level of the faculty.

Allowing students a large degree of flexibility in their choice of courses is a common trait for most British universities. This enables students to customise the direction of their degree and prioritise the subjects of their preference. In a long-term perspective I believe this is beneficial as it enables students to specialise early in a specific field of academia and provides the additional benefit of letting students choose subjects that truly interest them. Many universities also allow students to make changes to their course schedule after having attended the first lectures.

The challenge the coursework presents is a result of both the structure of the teaching, the format of the exams and the expectations set out by the professors. Although each course at LSE covers between 10-20 topics (depending on the course lasts 10 or 20 weeks), students are told to focus on no more than five to seven topics before exams. The reason for this is that it is considered near impossible to cover every topic in sufficient detail. This approach leads to a certain degree of specialisation and ties in well with the exam format, where students answer two or three essay questions out of a total of eight.

The overall high level of the faculty is first and foremost evident in the lecture halls. As most of the professors are accomplished researchers within the field that they teach, it is perhaps unsurprising that most lectures are conducted with enthusiasm and genuine interest. It is indeed inspiring for students to hear the subject material explained through the professors’ own findings and observations. The high academic standard is also a result of the fact that most professors are prepared to provide the students guidance in order to succeed in their courses. The weekly seminars are normally conducted by professors or lecturers, as opposed to teaching assistants, and these make a point of being accessible for questions that students may have outside lectures and seminars. In fact, at many British universities the students are not only assigned a personal tutor at graduate level, but also at undergraduate level.

The high expectations of the professors accentuate the need to specialise in a limited number of topics. Students are expected not only to be able to apply the course material (for this you will most likely receive only a passing grade), but also to demonstrate a certain degree of specialised knowledge and understanding of the material through drawing in other aspects than what was covered in lectures. Refreshingly, independent thinking and the ability to argue against a point made by the professor, in a well reasoned manner, is not only considered positive but also strongly encouraged.

The amount of time that professors or lecturers are able to spend with students is a central aspect of the funding discussion currently taking place within British higher education. The dire state of the country’s economy, which includes a public sector net debt of £870 billion (as of December 2009), has recently led to severe spending cuts in university budgets. In December last year, Lord Mandelson, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, the department responsible for higher education, announced that the Government would be forced to cut university funding by £915 million in 2010. Following warnings that there will be further cuts of £1.6 billion by 2013, valid concerns are being raised over the future of Britain’s higher education system.

The fear is that these cuts will threaten to erode the academic quality of British degrees, as institutions will be forced to close large number of faculty posts as well as reduce the number of available student places. It is also thought that class sizes and tuition fees will have to increase in order to meet the new spending limitations. A major concern is that the funding cuts will mean that the time between students and professors will be reduced to a minimum, leading to lower quality degrees. Forced to prioritise their time on teaching, there are also worries that professors will not be able to do sufficient research in their fields. As research and teaching are both vital to maintaining the standing of a university, the proposed measures will undoubtedly weaken the ability of British universities to uphold their high academic reputations.

Preserving the high-level faculty and challenging coursework that most British universities enjoy today will be vital in order to uphold the long tradition of academic excellence in British higher education. The question is if the task of maintaining this will be too challenging in light of the severe spending cuts that are looming in the years to come. The hope is that a world-class education system, that took 800 years to create, will persevere for the benefit of future generations of students.
Targeting education: the experience of the Labour government 1997-2010
By Alan Smithers

The elusive quest. As the Labour government’s third consecutive term in office comes to an end, it is a good time to take a close look at its most distinctive education policy, and ask whether it has succeeded.

Labour came to power in May 1997 with a deep and genuine desire to improve education in England (education in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is the responsibility of their separate administrations). It felt that Conservative reforms in the previous decade - a national curriculum, national tests, a beefed-up inspection service and financial delegation to schools - did not go far enough.

In the new government’s view these changes were essentially structural and it wanted something to drive improvement. Taking advice from its friends in business and industry, particularly BP, it became persuaded that monitoring progress in relation to centrally-set targets was the way to do it.

National targets were announced for the tests at the end of primary education and the exams at the end of secondary education. Everyone from the education minister downwards was held responsible for them being met. Ministers made presentations to a committee including the prime minister every six weeks on progress towards the various targets. Schools failing to meet their individual targets were named and shamed. Staff in schools with improved results received bonuses, but headteachers of schools with stubbornly poor results were liable to be sacked and the schools themselves closed.

At first sight the approach seems to have been very successful. Chart 1 shows the trajectories of the maths and English scores at the end of primary school since the tests were first introduced in 1995. Overall the proportion achieving the expected standard has increased by more than 30 percentage points from 49 in English and 45 in maths in 1995 to respectively 80 and 79 in 2009. Similarly, the story at the end of secondary school, as Chart 2 shows, has been of many more children meeting the basic benchmark of five good passes. Since 1997 the percentage reaching the benchmark standard has risen by 20 points.

Does this mean then that this is a policy than can be recommended to other countries? The government would like to think so. But there are a number of reasons for being cautious. The first is the actual shape of the curves. In the primary schools it is clear that maths and English performance was rising before the targets were brought in. In fact, the increases in the three years from 1995 to 1997, 14 points in English and 17 in maths, were greater than in the decade from 1999, when it was ten points for both subjects. What seems to have happened is that primary schools were shocked by the first results and worked out ways of effecting improvements on their own. There was a further push when national literacy and numeracy strategies came in 1997 and 1998, but the rises soon hit a ceiling of around 80 per cent. The

The results at the end of secondary school were also improving before targets were brought in. Chart 2 shows they have risen every year since the examination changed in 1988. The percentage achieving five passes in the old ordinary-level examination plateaued at just above a quarter of 16-year-olds, but since it was replaced by the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) the proportion achieving five passes has increased by 35 percentage points - 15 points before New Labour and its targets came in. Moreover, recent results have been boosted by adding in vocational qualifications and counting them as equivalent to four GCSEs. So while test and examination scores have undoubtedly been going up there have to be doubts about what this has to do with education.

A second reason for being cautious is that England’s educational performance on the international stage has not improved in line with the national test results. Along with the other countries of the OECD, England (as the major component of the UK) took part in tests of 15-year-olds in reading, maths and science organised by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000, 2003 and 2006. Chart 3 shows England’s ranking among the 26 (out of 30) OECD countries that took part in all three subjects on all three occasions. Rather than going up as might be expected from the official internal results, England’s international rankings drop - from 4th to 8th in science, 7th to 17th in maths and 7th to 12th in reading. It could be argued that this is because other countries have improved even more, but since this would have been without benefit of targets, at the very least it calls into question the efficacy of the target-setting approach. This is further suggested by other studies of pupil performance in England undertaken by independent researchers, which have tended to bear out the international comparisons.
A third reason for questioning whether England’s education has really been improving is that it doesn’t feel like it. People haven’t been reacting as if it had improved markedly. Parents are still keen to pay large fees to send their children to independent schools. Still large numbers of pupils truant from school. Employers continue to be vociferous in their complaints that young people have not learnt how to handle words and numbers properly. The teacher unions are bitterly learnt how to handle words and numbers.

Why then should there be this gulf between what the test and exam results appear to show and how people react to them? The answer seems to be that tests and exam scores are only a proxy for the quality of education, not education itself. Whereas, for example, when you are counting barrels of oil, a barrel is a barrel, exam scores are detachable from the underlying education. If exam grades mean for schools, rewards and sanctions, like more pay or being sacked, then it is unsurprising that the scores should rise. But much of the increase appears to be due to the emphasis on test taking techniques rather than understanding itself. Hence the apparent contradiction of many more children leaving primary school meeting the expected standards for English and maths, but secondary schools complaining that the children coming to them do not appear to have a greater grasp of the subjects, and employers continually drawing attention to low literacy and numerical skills.

That much is relatively easy to see, but it is increasingly being argued that the target-setting approach is a symptom of something much more serious - the Labour government’s move away from the intrinsic purpose of education, which is to pass on from one generation to the next the main ways humans beings have found of making sense of the world. Instead they have loaded the curriculum with extrinsic purposes. Targets are but one example. The creation of a subject called citizenship heavily influenced by the government’s view of the good life is another. The way education is expected to solve society’s social problems from unhealthy eating to teenage pregnancy is a third.

A reason parents are prepared to pay large fees, if they can afford them, for their children to go to independent schools is that the education seems so much better. The results are so good that the government has put pressure on the leading universities to increase the share of their intakes from state schools by admitting on lower grades. But it is not just the exam scores where the independent schools stand out; the education seems altogether more rounded. Opponents of private schooling put this down to wealthy backgrounds and academic selection. But the gulf between independent and state schools has greatly widened in the 13 years of Labour government, which suggests an alternative explanation. Although the government has been attempting to rein in the independent schools, even now they are comparatively free of central interference. The schools have, therefore, continued to do what they do best, and what attracts parents to them - educating children and educating them intrinsically.

This is the key to understanding why the rising test and exam results in England have not been warmly applauded and success has not been acknowledged as the government feels is its due. It looks as though the government has tried too hard. By centrally directing and continually interfering it has militated against just what it intended to achieve - an education system of which it could be proud. The difficult lesson for any government is that when it comes to high quality education it is better to stand back. It is necessary to grant schools autonomy and ensure that there are professional teachers able to teach their subjects in meaningful ways.

Granting teachers freedom and schools autonomy does not mean that they should be unaccountable. Independent schools in England uphold their very high standards because they are directly answerable to parents whose fees keep them in being. State schools must be accountable to the country as a whole. Responsibility for this has been delegated to an inspection service. But under Labour the inspections have become tied to the targets and test results. Rather than observing lessons, the inspectors have become bureaucrats operating government formulae. To make schools genuinely answerable for the quality of education they provide, the box-ticking bureaucrats should be replaced, as Seldon has suggested, by teams consisting mainly of serving teachers on secondment.

The paradox emerging from the Labour government’s passionate and determined attempt to improve education in England between 1997 and 2010 is that the more you need to do less. For the next government the doing should be in the undoing. The key issues will be how to unravel the target-setting culture and to free up schools and teachers to provide high quality intrinsic education. It is a question that all governments face. They should not assume that target-setting in England has been a success.

**Suggested further reading:**

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**Chart 3: England’s PISA Rankings out of 26 OECD countries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2006</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>7=</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7=</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Slovakia and Turkey did not take part in 2000 and the Netherlands was excluded because of a very low response rate. The US did not record a reading score in 2006.

The political battlefield(s) of education

By Sarah Ebner

Never-ending debate.
There are few more important touch points in British politics than education. This was a crucial battleground long before the future Prime Minister Tony Blair emphasised “education, education, education” as his priority back in 1997. Since then it has become ever more controversial and important. The Conservative opposition spokesman on education, Michael Gove, has a central role in his party’s plans for government. Parents – and women in particular – are seen as a very desirable constituency to win over. And for parents, few things matter more than their children’s education.

As the writer and editor of an education blog, I see this all the time. My blog, School Gate, is written from the parental point of view, and I was given the job as an experienced journalist who is also the parent of school-aged children, rather than as an education specialist. Since starting in July 2008, I’ve learnt a great deal, particularly about the neuroses of British parents, and their fears and hopes about the education system. It’s sometimes depressing, always stimulating, and gives a fascinating insight into education in the UK.

The British education system is unique, and very complicated (it also differs in the constituent countries of the UK: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). The majority of schools are state-funded and comprehensive (open to all), but around seven percent are private (fee-paying). It may sound like a small number, but this seven percent matters hugely, largely because it’s the private schools which get the best examination results and propel their students into the top universities. Oxford and Cambridge are held up as particular examples of universities which have a completely disproportionate number of students who were educated at private schools (around 43 percent of their intake). In recent years the Labour government has sought to encourage these universities (and others in the top echelons) to take more children from state schools. This produces its own problems – if the students from the private schools are getting higher grades, is it fair for universities to make lower offers to those who come from state schools?

Many parents who have their children at state schools would love the private option, but it is extremely expensive (anything from around £12,000 a year upwards). These same parents often call for more grammar schools - state schools which select on the basis of academic ability - but there are just 646 of these in England and no more planned (they were part of the British system of education and far more common up until the 1960s and 1970s, when comprehensive schools were introduced). None of the major political parties will commit to setting up more grammar schools, despite parental demand. They are seen by many as elitist. Entry is also extremely competitive – some schools are said to have 20 candidates for each place.

Another major British peculiarity is the number of single-sex schools we boast (many, but not all, private). These schools also tend to do very well academically – the top five schools ranked by A level or GCSE results this year (public exams taken at 18 and 16), were all single-sex. We also have an increasing number of faith schools – Church of England, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and now Hindu. Most of these are state-funded, although they do have to meet strict educational criteria. However, this still upsets a considerable percentage of non-religious parents as they argue that their taxes fund these schools, while their children would not be accepted as pupils.

If it sounds complex, it is, and that’s without all the different varieties of state funded schools on offer. However, despite the different schools and government assertions of “choice”, many parents are left with little say in where to send their child.

Instead they look upon private schools (which have smaller classes and stricter exclusion policies) with envy. Middle-class parents in particular (and they make up much of my traffic to the blog) grumble about how unhappy they are and how their children are not being stimulated at school. At the same time, the teachers complain about how difficult it is to teach in the 21st century, and especially about the amount of paperwork they have and the number of students they see who have no idea how to behave (and how limited their options are when it comes to dealing with them).

Writing the blog has made me pick-up on what really matters to parents and, although it may sound obvious, the answer is their own children. Many parents appear not to care at all about other children; they simply don’t view education altruistically. Instead, they want badly behaved pupils to be removed, taken far away, and they don’t care what happens to them afterwards. They also don’t worry that tutoring their child for a grammar (selective) school might be “unfair” on those who can’t afford a tutor. What’s important is to get their own children into the “right” school. There is an unbelievable amount of stress about school admissions and offers.
The political battlefield(s) of education (cont.)

By Sarah Ebner

It’s all been a real eye-opener for me, and yet I understand it too. Obviously I care about my children, and admit to some of the same concerns – particularly about how much my children are stimulated and stretched academically in a state school. In the rush to pass the requisite number of exams to achieve a higher ranking in the school league tables, educational resources often go to those who are borderline fails, and not to those who might make it from a B to an A. What education your child gets can be something of a lottery.

However, I also care about the bigger questions, about helping all children to achieve their potential, to help make society not just fairer but happier. I realise that some children are academically brighter than others, and think that not enough time is spent helping them. But I also think we should have much better academic standards, high standards, Sweden’s school programme), experts laud the Scandinavian way (Finland’s system of higher education sector, universal change in the system is strange due to historical reasons too. If I’m honest I wish positive change could come more quickly, and think that while many are quick to pile responsibility (and blame) onto teachers, they often miss the real culprits – the parents.

The visitors to my blog are concerned parents, who play an active part in their children’s education. They read to them, encourage them, talk to them and educate them far more broadly than simply relying on the school system. Many other parents don’t – they have children who never read, who have no books, who take time on homework and other extra curricular activities with their children than those of children from less-educated families.

University finances and the tuition fees saga

By Øivind Bratberg

Providing a first-class system of higher education is costly, as many countries have learnt over the last few decades. Providing for the hungry masses of undergraduates alongside cutting-edge research is a daunting task across the western world. Britain finds itself in the midst of universal change in the higher education sector, throws into relief a set of shared challenges while adding a few of its own.

The 1980s and 90s saw a galloping growth in student numbers in Britain. Meanwhile, public investment in higher education did not keep pace, as was made clear by the Conservative governments of Thatcher and Major. The tuition fees debate thus started from the premise that universities as well as students were under-funded across Britain. In 1990, student loans where introduced and the system of universal public grants gradually scaled down. Thus, some of the costs of higher education were moved from the public to the private purse, but little was done to amend the financial state of the universities. With Labour entering government in 1997, this issue was over-ripe for resolution.

The rest, as they say, is history: In 1998, Labour introduced annual tuition fees of £1,000, to be means-tested on the basis of ability to pay. At the same stroke, remaining maintenance grants were abolished. The resulting regime added regrettably small amounts to university coffers, and it was directly debilitating to the recruitment of poorer students. Five years later, the next step of reform sought to amend these shortcomings by permitting universities to “top up” fees towards a preliminary limit of £3,000. Fees would be covered by loans with repayment subsequent to graduation. A raft of grants and bursaries for poor students were introduced to sweeten the pill: still, protests were loud on Labour’s own back benches, and the bill would take Tony Blair closer to a vote of no confidence than any other issue including Iraq. At the second reading in the House of Commons, the majority was secured by 46 Scottish Labour MPs voting with the government. They did so knowing that the reform would not apply in Scotland.

And it is here that the tuition fees saga takes a particularly fascinating turn. Higher education policy is a devolved issue in Scotland (and since 2004 also in Wales). Neither the principle of tuition fees nor the corollary of variable fees found any resonance in Scotland. Indeed, tuition fees became a prime example of the supposed contrast between neoliberal England and left-leaning, social democratic Scotland. Cross-party agreement was assured as soon as the Liberal Democrats had pressed its coalition partners in Scottish Labour into the mould. The resulting Scottish Graduate Endowment required the majority of graduates to pay a flat-rate contribution of £2,000, to be redistributed through bursaries to poorer students. The arrangement was redistributive in ambition and a reminder to students of broader social responsibilities. However, the endowment fitted less convincingly with the principle of free education, and in 2008 the (now SNP-led) Scottish Parliament abolished the Endowment altogether.

The resulting constellation of university financing across Britain is intriguing. In England, a review is under way which may let loose the variable fees regime far beyond the initial £3,000 mark. In contrast with the English students forced to invest in higher education, in Scotland, university studies (save for some courses) remains free and accessible while in Wales a modified fees system favouring Welsh students has been introduced. English students pay English fees in Scotland, while Scottish students are subsidised to enter other parts of the UK.

More worrying than the issue of student mobility however are the conflicting pressures exerted on universities. Public funding of the university sector is an exercise in Darwinist competition over teaching and research. Finances are anyhow insufficient to cover the cutting-edge research for which British universities are world-known. Tuition fees were meant to move a significant part of the burden to competitive market exchange between universities and students. However, the variable fees, if let loose from their current cap, have unpredictable consequences for the large number of universities beyond Oxbridge and their like which are encouraged to pull away from the mass. Meanwhile, in Scotland, where the flame of social justice is maintained, universities are in the deepest predication of all, utterly dependent on a public purse which is tightened in Scotland when UK government expenses are stripped. Whatever the next decade brings in the politics of British higher education, we can be assured that these issues will not easily leave the agenda.
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Guest lecture by John Hutton MP

Hosted by British Politics Society, Norway, in collaboration with the Dept of Political Science at the University of Oslo.

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Forthcoming edition of British Politics Review

After five long and eventful years Britain is heading towards the next general election. Expected to be held on 6 May 2010, the election raises the prospect of extensive parliamentary change, most obviously concerning the balance between the parties and the possibility for a change of government. However, the House of Commons to be elected this spring will also bring in a whole new class of MPs and a demand for “cleaning up politics” after the controversial events at Westminster over the last year. Reform of parliamentary procedures as well as the electoral system itself have been much debated and decisions await after the election.

The spring issue of British Politics Review is exclusively devoted to the forthcoming election. We will aim to establish some of the key battlelines, important candidates and unresolved issues and debates. Moreover, the Review will cast a glance back at the New Labour era as well as forward towards the coming era of British politics. A hung Parliament? Coalition government with further constitutional reform as prerequisite? Or, a clear mandate to Gordon Brown or David Cameron to form the next UK government and take Britain out of the financial recession? Only the election night can tell - but British Politics Review will provide some preparatory guidance.

The spring edition of British Politics Review is due to arrive in April 2010.