Sir John Cass's Foundation Inaugural Lecture

2007

Towards an 80% Education System

Andrew Adonis,
Parliamentary Under Secretary
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Towards an 80% Education System

I want today to set out an 80% vision for English education by 2020.

A generation ago we had a 20% education system. The top 20 per cent or so of teenagers gained good school leaving qualifications, with fewer than one in ten going on to higher education; the other 80 per cent left school with only a basic education and few qualifications, including a tail of more than one in ten embarking on adult life without even basic competence in literacy and numeracy.

The social and economic imperative of the next two decades to boost social mobility is to switch these proportions and create an education system where 80 per cent and more succeed. Currently we are just above 50%. But we lack a fixed view of our medium-term objective, beyond incremental year-onyear improvement in average attainment, and educationalists and politicians ambitious for significant further system improvement face deep 'more means worse' scepticism which has – to be frank – made them reluctant to be explicit about a future goal lest they be accused either of utopianism or "dumbing down".

Today I want to be explicit. It is time, I believe, to declare that an 80% goal for English education in 2020 is right, realistic and realisable, with the necessary reform and investment.

Of course, the system must always strive to educate every child to high standards. It should never give up on any individual whatever the scale of the challenge. This is why, for example, the government has given such strong emphasis to improving the opportunities for looked-after children, for whom the education and care systems have so palpably failed to deliver. However, at the moment we're essentially a "50 percent system" and if as Gordon Brown argued last week we are to become world-class – "the education nation" – then by 2020 we need to be at 80%. So let me set out why 80% is right, realistic and realisable.

Obviously 80% is right in principle. If it be possible, how could any progressive politician or educationalist not want to see an overwhelmingly well-educated population?

My creed is Thomas Jefferson's: 'If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilisation, it expects what never was and never will be.' My friend Richard Layard has recently suggested that happiness should be taught as a subject in school. This is a characteristically interesting idea, but in truth it is the acquisition of a good standard of education itself which on most objective measures of well-being – including health, longevity, elevation from poverty, effective parenthood and stability of relationships – represents the decisive contribution which democracy and public institutions can make to human happiness.

Jefferson's younger Enlightenment contemporary was Adam Smith. One hardly need say in City University that education underpins the wealth of nations as surely as it promotes individual well-being. On any analysis of international trends, the only question is who gets to 80% first and what price will be borne by those who get there late. I have made recent study visits to Finland, Ireland, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong – strong economies with in differing ways leading-edge educational progress – and they leave me in little doubt about this. In Singapore, for example, where students still sit Cambridge board O-levels and A-levels, 75 percent of 16 year-olds last year gained five or more good O-level passes or equivalent – fully 25% higher than the proportion achieving at equivalent GCSE level in England. So Singapore – a multi-ethnic society, a nation state for barely a generation, with students sitting exams in what is mostly their second language, English – is not far short of 80% already. The issue therefore is not about the validity of the 80% goal, but about the realistic timescale for achieving it – whether it be 13 or 30 years. For the good of our society and economy, the sooner the better.

But if 80% is right, is it realistic by 2020? Before the wailing chorus of "more means worse" begins, I would urge a pause to consider and reflect on quite how much educational progress has been made in the past generation, and why we should not be less ambitious about the future than the actual achievement of the recent past, particularly the last decade.

Soon after I became Schools Minister I read a striking book published 40 years ago by David Hargreaves – then a young academic, now one of our most eminent educationalists – based on his year as a resident researcher at a secondary modern school in Salford Docks.[1] He describes the school as 'not very exceptional' for a working class community a generation ago in the mid-sixties.

David Hargreaves' description of this 1967 English secondary modern is so shocking as to be almost unbelievable from today's perspective. Most of the boys at the school took no external exams at all and gained no qualifications whatsoever, with only a minority in top streams even entered for a local school leaving certificate – for which cheating was widespread among staff and pupils.

The new national CSE exam was coming in – a much inferior form of O-level – but there was no encouragement from the headteacher or most of the teachers on even the brightest pupils to stay at school beyond the school leaving age of 15 to take it. As for O-levels, David Hargreaves wrote: 'Only one member of staff felt strongly that even the best boys, in the top stream, were of sufficient ability to take O-level; most of the other teachers of the higher streams took the view that ... to enter them for O-level would be to mislead the pupils with hopes of academic success beyond their powers. There is also little doubt that some of these teachers were reluctant to teach to O-level since they had never done so and were uneasy about their competence to do so'. As for the wider ethos of the school: 'Lessons and exams were treated with contempt by most of the boys. ... For many of the teachers and most of the pupils life at the school was a necessary evil. Life was directed towards a reduction of potential conflict by a minimal imposition of demands one upon the other. If the upper streams passed their [school leaving] exam and the lower streams did not riot, the school was for most teachers succeeding.'

That was Salford 1967. A fortnight ago I visited Salford 2007 to launch the Government's 'Greater Manchester Challenge' programme. Today, virtually all Salford's 16 year-olds of course sit GCSEs; more than half of them now get five or more good passes,

1 David Hargreaves, *Social Relations in a Secondary School* (1967); the quotations are from pages 86,87 & 184.

up from 31% only ten years ago. The number of applications to higher education from Salford young people has increased by 62% over the past 4 years alone. The purpose of the 'Greater Manchester Challenge' is to improve the leadership of the weaker schools to drive up the rate of improvement considerably faster still. The launch event took place next to The Lowry at Salford Quays. Salford Docks no longer exists; nor do the mills and their monoculture which dominate Lowry's paintings. Instead, the BBC is about to arrive at Salford Quays in what is now being dubbed 'media city'. Media technology and high tech skills are the demand of the future. Next to the BBC will go a new city academy. The academy's social enterprise sponsor is passionate and professional about transforming education in disadvantaged areas. Media technology will be the academy's specialism and the BBC one of its partners.

I could tell this story time and again from my own direct experience as a minister. Perhaps the most inspirational of the new city academies for which I have been responsible is Mossbourne in Hackney. Mossbourne is on the site of Hackney Downs School, a failing school so notorious that it was closed a decade ago by a special commission sent in from the Department for Education. Michael Barber, one of its members, and now Senior Adviser to the new Council on Educational Excellence to be established by Gordon Brown, recalls that the best results at GCSE were in Turkish, a subject not even taught at the school; worse still, in a class of 15 and 16 year olds a significant number of pupils struggled to divide 168 by 12 and some were unable to say how many pence there were in £1.85. Mossbourne Academy, in stark contrast, has just been rated outstanding by OfSTED in almost every area. The school is six times oversubscribed, with a wide curriculum built on success in the basics, and an ethos of discipline, learning and high aspiration. Its headteacher, Sir Michael Willshaw, one of the newly designated National Leaders of Education, confidently predicts that about 80% of the first cohort of pupils will get five or more GCSEs when they sit them in two years' time.

If we look to the other countries I visited, the progress has often been greater still in the past generation. Ireland, back in 1967, was a largely rural economy with a statutory school leaving age of 12 – yes 12. There was not even a right to free secondary education. Forty years on, Ireland now has nearly 60% of young people going on to higher education, which is substantially more than England.

So much for individual studies and anecdote. If we look at the statistics, the 80% goal by 2020 looks equally realistic – taking 80% to be at the level of 5+ good GCSE passes, preferably including English, maths and accredited vocational programmes. It is an ambitious target, and 2020 would be an ambitious date to achieve it. But I do not believe it to be in principle either unrealistic or unattainable. On this measure we are currently at 59% for any five GCSEs and 45% including English and maths. At the start of GCSE 18 years ago, the proportions were 32% and 29% respectively – so there has been a near doubling on the first measure and 55% on the more demanding second one. And in terms of the younger children coming through, thanks to a decade of relentless attention to the basics, the proportion of 11 year-olds reaching the required standard in both English and Maths now stands at 70%. So, 80% requires relentless improvement, but not at an unrealistic rate if our will is matched by concrete and credible policies.

Let me offer two other statistical dimensions. There are already in England today more than 600 non-selective schools where more than 70% of the pupils get five or more good GCSEs. A decade ago the number was only 83. And looking at the actual profile of pupil achievement at GCSE, it would be possible to increase the five good GCSE proportion to more than 70% simply by successfully targeting those students who currently gain at least one high grade GCSE pass and up to four more at grade D. This is surely a manageable, not a Herculean, task. It is in the bottom quartile of the cohort that deeper failure is embedded; but even there, the proportion of 16 year-olds leaving school with no qualifications has more than halved in the past decade from 7.7% to 3.3%.

Let me say a word about two related issues repeatedly raised in my recent overseas visits: culture and creativity. The 2,000 year-old Confucian tradition and the immense value it places on learning and education permeates all the Asian societies I visited. Sometimes physically so: waiting to greet me in the entrance hall of Jian Guo High School, a leading Taipei boys secondary school, were not only the headteacher and students but also a larger-than-lifesize cast of Confucius surrounded by his numerous disciples, the remarkable bronze dating back to the school's foundation in 1898. 'He is our patron saint', remarked the headteacher with pride.

In the past England could have done with a few more education patron saints, rather than Pink Floyd and 'We Don't Need No Education'. But cultures are created and can be changed; there is nothing immutable about them and fatalism is a lazy course of least resistance. On my visits I was struck by the remarkable education cultures of Finland and Ireland, cultures which date back decades rather than centuries, intimately associated with 20th century nation-building. In England we are, I believe, making good progress in creating a new national culture of education. It is now 30 years since James Callaghan became the first prime minister to put educational improvement centre stage. When eleven years ago Tony Blair said his three priorities would be 'education, education, education', John Major's riposte was equally significant: 'I have the same three priorities, but not necessarily in the same order'. Last week Gordon Brown devoted a whole Mansion House speech to the City on education as his 'passion' and national priority, setting out his plan for a new National Council for Educational Excellence embracing the leaders of schools, business, higher education and government.

This comes after a decade of transformed educational attainment, a surge of student applications for higher education, a 50% real-terms increase in public spending on education, and a schools capital programme increased tenfold from £650m to £6.5bn, which is totally rebuilding or substantially refurbishing all secondary schools and half of all primary schools over a 15 year period – the biggest school-building programme in history and positively Victorian in its scale and boldness. None of the countries I visited is investing on this scale, nor integrating IT into education as systematically as we are, and England is now spending more of its GDP on education than any of the countries I visited besides Finland. Add to this the fact that our leading universities – which have had a decade of strong growth and investment – are stronger and more internationally respected than ever before; and that our leading schools – state and private – are now generally recognised as world class, and one can see radical cultural change underway, revaluing education upwards socially and politically. This crucially underpins the 80% vision and mission.

Indeed, in one key respect, the Pacific Rim countries I visited want to be more like they believe we are. The word on all their lips is 'creativity'. Their self-analysis is that their education systems are good at knowledge acquisition, in maths and the sciences in particular – a remarkable 80% of all A-levels in Singapore are sat in maths and the sciences, compared to just 28% in England – but they now believe they need to be stronger in the arts, music, and soft non-examined skills. They look to us for inspiration. But it is important to understand what it is that inspires them. By 'creativity' they mean the success of our leading schools, state and private, in fostering sport, music and the arts, and instilling social confidence and life-skills. They are right to admire these qualities: the strength of our best schools in creativity is one of the glories of the English education system. It is part of what makes these schools world leaders, with their 'total' approach for education typically based on a 10-12 hour school day including a wide range of extra curricular activities.

However, in terms of our own national debate – where 'creativity' is sometimes set in opposition to competence in the core curriculum – it is important to understand that our leading schools foster creativity *in addition* to qualifications success, not as a substitute. The education leaders I met in Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong, some of whom send their children to England's leading private boarding schools, certainly understand this. And here in England, I have yet to visit the school which is brilliant at creativity but fails in its basic educational mission. Creativity is an integral part of the 80% vision: it is not a substitute for it.

So, 80% is right and realistic. But is it realisable? This is the third section of my lecture – the means to achieve 80%. All our best intentions, all our new investment, and all our confidence born of recent success, will be as nothing without a rigorous and hard-headed approach to the reforms required to achieve the next challenging phase of educational transformation.

With a degree of simplification to avoid trying your patience, I would suggest that there are ten essential policy building blocks required to get to 80%.

First, further investment in, and reform of, the teaching profession to secure its position as a foremost national profession, attracting a steadily rising share of the best graduates.

Second, accelerated change to make 'every school a great school' in terms of ethos, governance, leadership and, in the case of secondary schools, stronger partnerships with employers and higher education.

Third, steadily greater diversity and choice for parents and pupils, both *within* schools and *between* schools, sufficient for every young person to be able to develop their talents to the full.

Fourth, we need to make a reality of extended schools, not only as institutions offering greater childcare and social services, but in terms of a wider and more personalised curriculum including all the elements of 'creativity' just mentioned.

Fifth, staying-on post-16, in full time education and training, needs to become the norm well beyond the 80% mark.

Sixth, we need to complete the creation of a national under-fives service, so that every parent gets proper support in the early years of the child's life and every child gets the best possible start.

Seventh, 80% does not mean we neglect the rest. We need transformed provision for those in danger of dropping out, those who do in fact drop out, and those whose specific learning difficulties will always need to be catered for outside the mainstream.

Eighth, there must be a steady expansion of higher education, up to and beyond the existing 50% target.

Ninth, our education system must be more internationally-focused, benchmarked against the best and intent on preparing pupils for the globalised world in which we now live.

And tenth, underpinning and making possible all nine previous steps towards 80%, there needs to be steadily rising public and private investment in education at all levels.

Let me start with teachers, the *sine qua non* of education.

Thanks to a decade of investment and reform, teaching is once again the career of choice for a large proportion of able graduates. There are 36,000 more teachers than in 1997, and 92,000 more teaching assistants. Average teacher pay his risen in real terms by 15 per cent, and 26 per cent for headteachers. We have also introduced training bursaries for PGCE students for the first time and extra "golden hellos" for maths and science graduates.

The single most encouraging statistic in the whole of English education today is that the number of honours graduates applying to train as teachers has risen by 70 per cent since 1997. In the last six years alone, maths graduate recruits to teaching are up from 1,300 to 2,000, and science applications are at the highest level for 20 years.

Teacher quality has risen sharply. In the late 1980s Eric Bolton, then chief inspector of schools, talked of the "stubborn statistic" of 25 per cent to 30 per cent of lessons being consistently judged by Ofsted as unsatisfactory. Now the proportion is less than 10 per cent and Ofsted describe the current generation of newly qualified teachers as "the best trained ever".

Structural reform has been as important as money to this quiet revolution in teaching. A decade ago the BEd and year-long PGCE, based in a teacher training department, were still the virtual monopoly routes into teaching, with their century-old assumption that teachers would be recruited straight from college or university and teach for life. Thanks to two major reforms since 1997, this is no longer the case.

The first change is the development of a mature entry route into teaching, enabling career-switchers to train directly in schools with a salary. The Graduate Teacher Programme – a complete re-design of the PGCE system for recruiting and training mature entrants to the profession – now recruits 5,500 new mature teachers a year, and accounts for one in five of all entrants to secondary school teaching. The average age of teacher trainees has risen to 30 for the first time.

The second radical change is Teach First, a programme developed five years ago by a team including blue-chip companies acting pro bono. Teach First targets high-achieving graduates, offering them a summer-long, dedicated training course after graduation followed by two-year teaching placements – in groups with proper support – in London secondary schools.

In only five years Teach First is transforming attitudes to teaching among top graduates in the leading universities. There are 1,500 applicants for the 300 places this year, all expected to secure a first or 2:1 degree, many of whom would otherwise have gone straight into the commercial sector. A Teach First meeting for final-year students I attended in Cambridge recently was packed out. So too a dinner for corporate sponsors and partners in the Royal Courts of Justice last week, where I found myself doing the warm-up for Boris Johnson. And the esprit de corps of Teach First participants is remarkable. More than half of the first cohort have stayed in teaching beyond the two years and many are well on their way to school leadership.

Teach First is extending to Manchester this year and to other cities thereafter. Within two years its intake will rise to 400 a year, making it the sixth-largest graduate recruiter in the UK. It need not stop there. A similar scheme in the United States now recruits 3,000 graduate high-flyers a year, up from 500 a decade ago. We need to expand Teach First as rapidly as quality will allow, instilling a real sense of educational 'national service' in our best graduates; and look at the potential of similar schemes for mid – and late – career professionals. 'Teach Next' and – but we need a better title for this one! – 'Teach Last' need to follow 'Teach First'; and as Gordon Brown said in last week's Mansion House speech, we need to set about creating them now.

The working conditions, training and appraisal of teachers have also improved radically. But more change is needed here, too. In Finland I was struck not only by the extraordinary social status of teachers – 10 applicants for every teacher training post – but also by the fact that almost all teachers either have a masters degree or are working towards one, their courses including practical projects to improve their pedagogy. When I asked the head of a primary school

in suburban Helsinki what was the biggest staffing problem she faced, she replied: " My best teachers going to do PhDs". I cannot think of anything I would be less likely to be told in an English school. We need to extend such opportunities to far more teachers in England, perhaps partly by means – as in Singapore – of special sabbaticals for the purpose.

Recruiting and training the next generation of headteachers is equally vital. The new National College for School Leadership, and its associated headship qualifications, are a major advance. But others have gone further: Singapore has a full-time six month training programme for its new headteachers, and 17 weeks for heads of department. The redesigned National Professional Qualification for Headship, which commences next year and which will be a requirement for all new headteachers from 2009, will improve our focus on the development or prospective heads. Future Leaders – another innovative scheme developed and led by the private sector – is one of several new programmes offering intensive training and accelerated promotion to potential heads, including candidates with non-conventional career paths.

Secondly, how do we make 'every school a great school'? In his outstanding new book with that title[2], the education reformer and former director at DfES David Hopkins writes:

It is salutary to recognise that whether the goal of 'every school a great school' is achieved or not, its realisation is more about professional and political will rather than strategic knowledge. It is now 25 years since Ron Edmonds asked his felicitous question: 'How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of all children?'

David Hopkins sets out in his book four key themes on the making of great schools: personalised learning, professionalised teaching, intelligent accountability and networking and innovation. I have already spoken about teaching and leadership. As to the others, for an 80% education system every student needs a personalised learning plan, starting with acquisition of the basics of literacy and numeracy which if they are not achieved in primary school

2 David Hopkins: *Every School a Great School: Realising the potential of system leadership* (Open University Press, 2007)

blight all else thereafter in education and indeed in life. Hence the primary school literacy and numeracy strategies; the Rose review, setting out best practice in phonics in the teaching of early reading; the steps we are now taking to improve the assessment of individual pupil progression, as well as raw performance; and also now our plans for 'Every Child a Reader' and 'Every Child Counts' schemes providing individual or small group tuition for primary school children falling behind in the basics.

The new approach to individual pupil tracking called 'Assessment For Learning' – with its emphasis on rich, personalised assessment, mentoring and target-setting for each student – has a key part to play here, as I saw recently in Seven Kings School, an excellent secondary school under the brilliant leadership of Sir Alan Steer serving a socially mixed community in Ilford. A remarkable 92% of pupils gained five or more good GCSEs at Seven Kings last year, 71% including English and Maths. Every teacher at Seven Kings is trained in AFL on arrival; the quality of each student's individual learning plan is exemplary; and each year the school – a specialist school with specialisms in science and technology including a huge chemistry department drawing A-level students into its 6th form from far afield – expands its curriculum. For example it now offers triple science GCSE to all higher achievers in the science KS3 tests, which is driving its excellence in A-level sciences.

A steadily broader curriculum in all schools is essential to achieving 80%, with a more diverse range of worthwhile qualifications for teenagers alongside success in the core subjects of English and maths. This broadening needs to take place within the traditional academic curriculum: both Singapore and Hong Kong are broadening their post-16 curriculum, including in Singapore a requirement for students to take at least one 'contrasting subject'. There also needs to be a radical expansion of work-related learning, as we are setting in train with the new diploma programme. I was struck in the Far East by the emphasis they are giving to work-related learning in both the reform of their curriculum and in the creation of new institutions. Work-related learning is a core part of the new diplomas for 14–18 year-olds being introduced into Hong Kong. In Singapore, the most impressive new institution I visited was the new Institute of Technical Education, a federated four-campus state-of-the-art college across the island for the least academically successful 25% of 16–18 year-olds. This new

college is part of a nationally-driven 'ITE Breakthrough Strategy' to make ITE a world-class technical education institution. It has the facilities and ambience of a university. I was told that among Singaporean teenagers and parents 'ITE' used to stand for 'It's The End'. Few are saying that any more. Nor in Taipei where at the Daan Technical High School – a 6th form vocational college – half the students in the packed college on a Saturday afternoon were taking electronics assembly courses which also require them to demonstrate proficiency in English or they fail the course.

The fatalists who say that countries with very strong academic school traditions cannot create, in a short timescale, quality vocational education institutions and pathways with real prestige should take note. It is being done abroad and it must be done here. We have started, but we have much further to go, particularly in institution building. With its usual vigour Singapore looked closely at other models, particularly Switzerland where they told us 70% undertake some form of applied learning; Japan where elite schools require students to study at least one applied subject; and Sweden where there a wide range of applied programmes in upper secondary schools.

Excellent institutions, with a powerful sense of mission and purpose, are the bedrock of a good education system. If you get the institutions that young people actually attend day-in, day-out right, everything else will probably follow – curriculum, aspiration, achievement. No tomes of the national curriculum or regulations from the DfES or a local authority will make good the failings of a bad school or college. To be a great school every school needs a powerful mission, ethos, specialist centres of excellence, and the leadership and staffing necessary. This is why we pioneered the specialist school programme which now embraces 86% of all secondary schools, and which we are about to pilot in primary schools too. It is also why we developed the academy programme, to be expanded to 400 schools. Academies are independent state schools; they bring together investment in new schools with a complete re-foundation of their governance and leadership in the hands of a sponsor, who is either an individual philanthropist or a not-for-profit trust with the capacity to provide first-class vision, leadership and governance on a par with those of our best state and private schools. Indeed the sponsors are often the trusts and management teams behind existing successful state and private

schools, and we are starting to build chains of academies with common management and branding. The most significant lead-indicator for the success of academies is the strength – praised by OfSTED – of their leadership and governance. The lessons for strong schools helping weak ones, in innovative federation arrangements, are now being extended across the schools system.

David Hopkins emphasises 'networking' as his fourth dimension of the 'great school'. 'Networking' – by which he means external partnerships, not endless drinks parties – isn't a word often applied to successful schools: educationalists usually focus their attention on teaching and learning within a school, not networks beyond the school. But I think Hopkins is making a profound point here: anyone who knows anything about England's private schools, and the advantages they confer on their students, realises the importance of their external partnerships, by which I mean not just their 'old boys networks' but the dense web of their links to the professions and to higher education, including the leading universities. As a lecturer at Oxford I was struck by how many fellow dons served on the governing bodies of leading private schools, and how networked these schools were to Oxford. And how rare it was for state schools to have similar connections. We need partnerships of this kind to extend to all state secondary schools. To achieve 80%, every secondary school needs to be networked into higher education and the professions. Every school should have at least one higher education partner and at least one business partner – and trust status is they way for them to achieve this in short order, alongside stronger specialist centres of excellence backed by appropriate sponsors.

As this happens, the quality of governance and the curriculum, the aspirations of students, and the number of 'great schools' will rise accordingly. As Gordon Brown put it in his Mansion House speech last week: "It is good for our country that we have businesses involved in some schools … . In future every single secondary school and primary school should have a business partner… . And every secondary school should have a university or college partner; and every school should work directly with the arts and cultural and sporting communities in their area."

Also, as this happens, the diversity of our school system will increase, with a wider range and choice available of schools with differing specialist centres of excellence, sporting and cultural facilities. This, too, is an international trend which I noted in all the countries I visited. In Ireland and Hong Kong, most state schools – including new schools – are run by independent trusts. Sweden has a thriving independent state school sector, including for-profit operators, which in barely 15 years has grown from nothing to 7% of school places.

Even Finland – which many think of as the pure version of a uniform community comprehensive model – is in fact no such thing. In Helsinki, parents of half the children entering secondary schools request a school other than the one originally allocated to them. At the upper secondary level, beyond the age of 16, there is wider choice still, with schools and vocational colleges competing strongly on the range and quality of their courses.

Helsinki's 200 secondary schools and colleges increasingly offer specialist teaching in particular subjects, from languages and environmental sciences to music and dance. Every family in Helsinki with a child embarking on secondary education receives a prospectus containing information about all the city's schools. I visited Kulosaari Secondary School in Helsinki, which as a non-specialist school 15 years ago was struggling to attract pupils. Now, as a bilingual school in Finnish and English, with an international curriculum, it draws students from across the city and beyond who study for English A-levels as well as the Finnish matriculation certificate. The local primary school has also gone bilingual, and caters for local children and a wider intake attracted by the bilingual specialism.

However, let me add a significant rider to what I have said so far. I am genuinely unsure what the proportion of teenagers beyond about four fifths can ultimately be brought up to Level 2 standard. Perhaps it may be possible to advance higher; none of my international visits gave me a clear view, and there were widely differing views expressed on this issue. But whether the attainable goal is 80%, 90% or 95%, there will always be a proportion who fall behind or drop out; there will also be a proportion of pupils with specific learning difficulties some – though by no means all – of whom can't be expected to reach Level 2, or not at any rate within

a normal timescale. As Minister for Special Educational Needs, educational provision for these students, and the opportunities open to them, are of acute concern to me. The diversity of our education system must include excellent provision for those who are not part of the mainstream – including young people at the complex end of the autistic spectrum, and those with communications difficulties, and serious emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Let me turn fourthly to extended schools. Like most of the best ideas, this is of course an old one: the idea that schools should not be simply six hour a day, 9am-3pm, institutions, but 10 to 12 hour a day institutions which provide a more complete education – and a wider range of social, cultural and sporting skills and opportunities – than is possible in schools which are open only half that time. Private secondary schools have long operated on the 10 to 12 hour a day model, with a rich array of after-school and holiday activities; this is one of the prime features which makes them attractive to parents and which, for example, accounts for the high proportion of the serious individual sportsmen and sportswomen who are privately educated. We are starting to introduce the 'complete school' concept into the state system too, including a wider availability of boarding for those with boarding need; but we have much further to go. It is vital that the extended schools programme does not become only about childcare and social care but also but a wide array of educational and cultural activities, making all our state schools beacons of creativity.

Fifth, staying-on past 16, in full time education and training, needs to be the norm. At 75%, our participation rate in full-time education and training is too low, and needs to be raised. Every country I visited was dissatisfied with its record in this area, even where it is more impressive than ours: Ireland has for some time had a target for 90% to complete upper secondary education – it is at 82% and has been plateaued there for a decade. Hence our current work on specialised diplomas, to be introduced next year. Hence our emphasis on 6th form provision in schools – astonishingly, in my view, only half our secondary schools have post-16 provision, another baleful legacy of the secondary modern era which needs to be overcome. Hence too Alan Johnson's determination to proceed next year with legislation to raise the statutory participation age to 18.

Sixth, a universal under-fives service, so that every parent gets proper support in the early years of the child's life and every child gets the best possible start. The lesson of Scandinavia is that although there are different ways of achieving this, nonetheless the provision of universal under-fives places in childcare centres, nurseries and schools is an integral part of both a modern education system and a modern society catering properly for working parents and single-parent families. Only last week the first results of the Millennium Cohort Study – a study of 15,500 children born between 2000 and 2002 – showed that even by the age of three, children from disadvantaged families were lagging a full year behind their middle-class contemporaries in social and educational development. One of our prime achievements in the last decade has been the advance of a universal under-fives service, with virtually all four year-olds and 96% of three year-olds now in at least part time nursery provision, with 1,317 local children's centres established so far and 2,200 more to come by 2010. This will mean a total of 3,500 and one for every community by 2010. Completing this programme is a vital element to the 80% education system.

So too, moving to the other end of the education spectrum, is the continued expansion of higher education, especially more work-related higher education as on the basis of our foundation degrees. The sceptics of our 50% target simply need to look abroad, where 50% is now widely exceeded. In Ireland, as I said earlier, nearly 60% now go on to higher education; only nine years ago, the proportion was 44% – which is about where England is now on the same measure.

Universities also need to lead the way in international education. In Singapore, there is a target for one third of secondary school pupils, and half of university students, to have at least one overseas experience, including school twinning programmes and, for university students, semesters abroad which count towards a degree. We are taking some welcome steps in this direction: for example the wider availability of the International Baccalaureate. But internationalising our education is a vital imperative if we are to hold our own in the globalising economy in the next generation.

Finally, underpinning every aspect of this 80% vision and mission must be increased resources, public and private. Over the past decade we have increased spending substantially: up by 65% in real terms, and as a proportion of national income from 4.7% to 5.6%. But more is needed, and others are equally ambitious. If I may now build on my last but most important excerpt from the Chancellor's Mansion House speech last week; "Taking private and public investments together, advanced industrial countries will have in future to aspire to invest not 5-6-7-8 per cent of their national income, on education science and innovation but 10 per cent, one pound in every ten. Today we invest £5,500 in the education of a pupil in the public sector and £8,000 or more in the private sector, 50 per cent per pupil less, and our aim is, over time, to raise our public investment towards that £8,000 figure."

To conclude. I believe that 80%, by 2020, is right, realistic and realisable. We should declare this to be our goal, and with a real national will and driving power I believe we can achieve it. In any event, if we are to be a successful, socially just and economically vibrant society into the 21st Century, we have no option but to go for it. There is a Chinese proverb: "what cannot be avoided must be welcomed." So welcome to the 80% challenge ahead. We all have our part to play.