

We need to educate for adaptability

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Education that pretends the world isn't going to change serves no one. It's time we taught people how to change with the times.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKH26HulwVo?si=yPVabomlOgh8Cf4w>

This is the audio version:

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This is the transcript:

A new report has come out, which suggests that there are major problems with the way in which the world's education systems are preparing young people for the world of work, and life at large, come to that.

The report suggests that in 20 years, we really have made no progress on this issue. And it says that after looking at the activities of the education systems of 80 countries, and this, to me, seems to be a damning indictment of the way in which we are now approaching education around the world. So this needs to be discussed.

The report comes from the OECD; that is, the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, which some people call 'The Rich Countries Club'. And it

is true that it is dominated by the world's wealthiest countries, but the reality is that for all its strengths and weaknesses, the OECD does prepare some of the best data in the world on educational comparisons, and that is why this report is so important, because it can draw on data which nobody else has got.

In particular, what is so important about this data is that it actually makes a comparison between the first ever report that the OECD prepared on this issue of preparing young people for work when they leave the education system, over 20 years ago, and where we are now.

There are some shocking findings.

For example, one is that the success that a young person has still depends as much on having personal connections as it does on their ability. We have not in 20 years done anything to improve the equality of access to high-paid work inside our economies. Who you know, rather than what you know, is what still matters.

And perhaps one of the other shocking findings of this report is that students are still being trained for outdated professions. Lawyers, accountants, doctors, architects, and so many professions where AI is going to have a radical transformation effect over coming years are still the chosen destinations of too many students who do not appreciate just how much the world of work is going to change in those areas over years to come. They are, therefore, being trained with skills that they may not need, and not with the skills of adaptation that they will require if they are to survive, even in those professions where the number of people working is almost bound to reduce. Education systems have simply not caught up with the way in which the world has changed, and that matters.

Let me use a personal example. I went to university in the 1970s. If someone had told me then that I would be working now as an internet content creator, making videos at home for publication for anyone to watch around the world, I would have laughed at them. And why not? We didn't have the technology to make these things. The internet hadn't been created. YouTube hadn't been heard of. There was no such thing as a digital camera. Of course, I could not have imagined that this would be where my career would end up, almost 50 years later.

So, what people need are the skills to be able to adapt to what is going to happen in the future, frankly, most of which we can't even imagine as yet. And change is now faster than it has ever been, are more unpredictable, and yet what is very clear from the OECD's findings is that we are simply not taking that into account in the education that people are being provided with.

I believe this creates an enormous problem. I don't think education is doing what is necessary to prepare people for change, most of all. And it is change, which dominates my thinking now, in this area. We've had education, which is focused fundamentally

upon the development of academic skills, and I shouldn't knock academic skills. Over the last 30 years, I've had appointments at six UK universities and ended up as a professor, and now as an emeritus professor. So I understand the value of academic thinking in my life. But I also understand that the vast majority of people do not need to understand how academic thinking works, and yet we have an education system that is totally oriented to the creation of academic skills. This, to me, now seems to be utterly absurd.

I'll return to the point in a minute, but what I believe is important is that what we now do is create an education system where we create transferable skills for life and work. Now, that requires a background in some key subjects, and you could say there's nothing particularly odd about the way in which I'm going to present this. I would suggest that we need skills in our first language. We do need skills in maths, but we also need to contextualise where we are in the world. We need to understand history. We need to understand geography. Perhaps we need to understand another language as well, to some degree, because that makes us understand that we are not so insular. But this is what education to the age of 16 has already tried to do for us, and I'm not suggesting that there be major change in education to that age, when around the world 16 is not the point where most people now leave school, and 18 is.

What I think we need to do is change what we think about when we come to further and higher education. That is education for the 16 to 18-year-old, which might still be at school, and for those who go on to university, which in a country like the UK, around 40% of people do at present. There, we need to remove some of the academic focus, because too much of that narrows the opportunity to learn the life skills we need. From the age of 16 onwards, at present we might learn too many facts, or at least far too many techniques, most of which will be deeply outdated. We learn too little about thinking, but the thing we learn about least of all is adaptability.

So, my suggestion is that we cut out around 40% of the demand that is now placed on people from age 16 to 18, and replace that with practical skills training.

So, for example, in a country like England, where I happen to be located, and where it is quite common for someone to take three subjects as their core subjects of study between the ages of 16 to 18, at least one of those should be dropped, and something which is much more general should be put in its place.

When we get to degrees, I'm suggesting something more radical still. I'm suggesting that in effect, every degree should become a joint honors degree at undergraduate level, with some of it being focused upon a particular area or study - whatever the person wants it to be - but the rest be focused upon these skills for adaptation which somebody will need, whatever degree they do in the eventual world of work.

So, what are those skills that people might need to be taught?

Effective written and verbal communication skills. They are paramount. AI is not going to eliminate them. You can't check AI if you haven't got skills in the first place to understand what your chosen language is meant to communicate. And throughout my career as an employer, and I've been an employer since the mid-1980s, and I still am, I have realised how few young people come out of school or university with either effective written or verbal communication skills. There's far too little focus on actually ensuring that a person can do something more than write a rather basic essay.

Essays are not the way the world works. People need to learn how to write letters and emails, and they need to learn how to present their arguments verbally, or to simply ask questions, and to understand answers. And yet far too little of that is understood.

There's also far too little understanding of basic numeracy, particularly when it comes to business situations, and so I would place this within the context of basic accounting, budgeting, and tax awareness. These are life skills that everybody needs and which are transferable into almost every business environment that I know of.

People need other skills as well. I think people should learn about website creation, because that is how we pick up information now.

We need to learn about things like time management.

We need to learn about social media management because we all participate in it, and we need to understand what the risks and advantages are and how to do it well.

And that leads to the idea that we might need to understand basic marketing, firstly, so that we can realise what is being done to us, and secondly, so if we have to do it, we are able to do so.

And the structure in which all these things take place needs to be understood. So basic things like contract law and employment law need to be taught to people so that they are equipped for the world they're going to enter.

And I believe that most employers would really welcome this. But what they would then be able to concentrate on is providing the specific skills that people need for the jobs that they're going to undertake when they arrive in work. In other words, I believe that education should not finish at 21, but there should be a continuing focus on education thereafter.

This could be through apprenticeship schemes, and every government should be encouraged to provide them. Whatever it is, there needs to be at that stage of people's careers, a focus upon applied education.

And this, by the way, is also true in academia, because there we should be actually making master's degrees the level where we fill in the gaps that have now been missed out at undergraduate level, before, if people want to go on to a career in academia,

they move to PhDs.

So what should we do? We should change the focus of education at age 16 to 18.

We should encourage the provision of joint honours degrees at university, where life skills are part of the essential curriculum, but that does not undermine the value of the degree. If anything, it enhances it. And, we reserve a specialised academic focus for postgraduate study.

What does this mean? It means that we would heed the warning that the OECD has given.

It would mean that we would prepare people for life.

It would mean we would build stronger, more resilient economies based upon people who know how to adapt.

And that is what we need for the world we now live in.