

POLICY BRIEFING

Northern Futures: Education

Professor Mel Ainscow
Professor Alan Dyson
Professor David Hall
Professor Ruth Lupton
Professor Carl Raffo

Manchester Institute of Education

SUMMARY

In his speech at the launch of the One North Report, the Chancellor signalled his intentions to build a ‘northern powerhouse’, to equal any major global city. Two key principles underpin this: the devolution of powers to ‘metros’, extending recent developments in which Manchester has been at the forefront with its combined authority and City Deal; and better linkages between Northern cities. To date, these ideas have been best developed in respect of governance, economic development, science and transport. The Chancellor argues that there is “more work to be done on skills, [and] schooling” and invites ideas.

The Manchester Institute of Education is the leading UK centre on urban education, conducting world-leading research, developing practice with schools, colleges and local authorities through its Centre for Equity in Education and training urban teachers across the North. In this briefing we draw on this expertise to set out a ‘road-map’ for education’s contribution to a Northern powerhouse, and indicate how the university might play a part in such a development.

CURRENT STATUS

Overall, the North does not suffer from a problem of poor schooling. Both the North West and North East have a higher proportion of outstanding schools and a lower proportion requiring improvement than the national average (<http://dataview.ofsted.gov.uk/>). Attainment overall is only slightly lower than the national average. However, there remain serious educational inequalities and pockets of disaffection and disengagement linked to expectations of an unrewarding labour market. There are quality issues at secondary level, with higher than average proportions of schools deemed inadequate or requiring improvement, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas. And as the Manchester Independent Economic Review indicated, there are also skill shortages, indicating that the education system is not producing all of the skills needed to support the region’s economic development.

Current arrangements for the governance of education create a number of challenges for ‘metros’ seeking to maximise educational opportunities in equitable ways and to develop the skills needed for sustainable and inclusive economic growth:

- Schools are increasingly run by autonomous trusts in a competitive environment (hyper-localism) while curriculum, assessment and accountability are controlled by the Secretary of State (hyper-centralism).
- ‘Metro authorities’ have no powers over education.
- Structures for school collaboration and improvement have been fragmented and FE colleges have been removed from local control and reconfigured as autonomous institutions competing for students.
- Knowledge of practice can therefore be captured locally but there are no mechanisms for moving knowledge around the system. Although Northern urban contexts have much in common with each other, the current structure prohibits a confident and coherent regional-level and educationally-focused voice emerging from schools and teachers and parents and pupils.
- The place of higher education institutions in national and global markets has been emphasised at the expense of their role in local and regional development.
- Teacher training is increasingly devolved to schools, making it difficult to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge to operate across the metro area or region. Simultaneously the potential for teachers to access research evidence through participation in postgraduate study has declined dramatically.
- Careers information, advice and guidance are at the discretion of individual schools.

BACKGROUND

These arrangements have derived from an approach to education policy driven from central government and based on principles of school autonomy, competition and accountability, as well as rigour in curriculum and assessment to enable national economic competitiveness. They have not started from the standpoint of the economic and social needs of a particular conurbation

or region and the governance arrangements needed to deliver these. Education policy has also operated largely independent of, and sometimes in tension with, other social and welfare policies. In highly disadvantaged schools, particularly, the requirements of school league tables have been shown to ‘trump’ school efforts at holistic approaches and multi-agency working (Crowther et al. 2003).

Here we argue that education should be at the heart of plans to create a Northern powerhouse. This means re-thinking the relationships between ‘metros’ and their schools and other educational institutions in ways that enable them to shape education to deliver their civic, social and economic goals and to better link school and college curricula to economic opportunity. It also means re-thinking relationships between educational institutions across the region, including enhancing the contributions of universities.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Our research and experience suggests three key areas for consideration. In raising these issues, we have an underlying understanding that what needs to emerge is a ‘nested’ education system in which different responsibilities are allocated to appropriate levels of the system. Three such levels seem to be needed – a national level, setting standards, macro agendas etc.; a local level (for the big cities – a ‘metro’ level) with an appropriate emphasis on institutional autonomy, but with strong encouragement for collaboration amongst institutions and between institutions and other services to tackle local issues; and a regional level at which local efforts can be shared and learned from, perhaps even co-ordinated.

A first consideration is the need to capitalise on the potential of an educational improvement model organised on a city-regional (‘metro’) rather than a local authority basis. The value of such an approach was demonstrated by the London Challenge (Hutchings et al. 2012), and, in the North, by the Greater Manchester Challenge, to which Professor Ainscow was Chief Adviser.

The overall approach of the Greater Manchester Challenge emerged from a detailed analysis of the local context, using both statistical data and local intelligence provided by stakeholders. This drew attention to areas of concern and also helped to pinpoint a range of human resources that

could be mobilized in order to support improvement efforts. Recognising the potential of these resources, it was decided that networking and collaboration should be the key strategies for strengthening the overall improvement capacity of the system. More specifically, this involved a series of inter-connected activities for ‘moving knowledge around’. After three years the impact was significant in respect to overall improvements in test and examination results, and, indeed, the way the education system carries out its business.

In a review of the longer-term impact of City Challenge, Hutchings and Mansaray (2013) conclude that the improvements have been sustained, both in London and Manchester. Their review identifies a number of reasons behind the continuing impact of each of the Challenges, such as, the timescale of the programme, the continuity of the personnel involved and the extent to which those in the area felt ‘ownership’ of the Challenge. Importantly, the authors note that ‘the challenges were comprehensive area-based initiatives that tackled all elements of schooling. It cannot be assumed that taking certain elements in isolation will be as effective as the combination of elements.’ However, the ‘Challenges’ have been discontinued under the current government.

Second, we suggest that consideration needs to be given to the value of greater sharing of expertise in teaching and learning across the North. By this we mean not only sharing practitioner knowledge between City Challenges (or in their absence between emerging clusters of schools), but supporting this with academic research and expertise. Classroom level improvement is rightly central to outstanding teacher training, but it needs to be complemented and supported by work emphasising the relationship between what happens within schools and what happens beyond the school gates, and by robust research on the effectiveness of particular practices in these contexts. Given the particular challenges of educational disadvantage, disaffection and labour market disengagement common to all the North’s large cities, educators in the region need to be able to develop and share expertise on what works here, and why. Currently, academic knowledge is scattered between the region’s universities, which are focusing their research efforts to greater or lesser extents on the region.

One way of addressing this would be the creation of a regionally focused ‘Northern Teaching and Learning Centre’ – a collaborative venue between universities and practitioners to join up the teaching and learning dots within and between Northern cities. Such a centre could strengthen

teaching and learning through mutually supportive exchanges between practitioners and researchers addressing both areas where there are promising developments and more recalcitrant problems where less progress has been made. A centre established along these lines would enable the promise of the Chartered London Teacher' initiative (<http://www.clt.ac.uk/>) to be re-contextualised within the North with an institutional base that could anchor its progress and development. As well as drawing upon the experiences of other UK regions a 'Northern Teaching and Learning Centre' might also build upon international centres such as the Consortium on Chicago School Research (<http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/>) which although located within the University of Chicago is based upon a collaboration between a number of regionally-located universities with a view to building capacity for school reform. MIE is especially well placed to enable and facilitate the creation and dissemination of such a centre.

Third, we suggest that more needs to be done to integrate education with wider social and economic agendas. Educational outcomes are important in their own right, and the education system should not be encouraged to compromise those outcomes in pursuit of other priorities. On the other hand, the gap in educational outcomes between more and less advantaged learners cannot be closed unless educational improvement is tightly coupled to efforts to tackle social disadvantage and its consequences. Educational institutions therefore need to work closely with other services to tackle the impacts of disadvantage in learners and the underlying causes of disadvantage in localities and regions.

There are already many examples in England and elsewhere as to how this might work:

- In a European context, Ballas et al (2012) have demonstrated the significance of intra- and well as inter-national educational inequalities, have argued for the integration of educational and social agendas, and have proposed that this calls for 'nested' responses at a range of system levels. There is also evidence of a growing range of area-based efforts at integration (Edwards and Downes 2013).
- In the US, there is a range of local initiatives bringing education and other services into close alignment in disadvantaged areas. Many of these are based on the Harlem children's Zone (www.hcz.org) which is being rolled out nationally in the form of the promise Neighborhoods initiative (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html>). Dyson et al (2012, 2013) have shown how such initiatives might be grafted onto the considerable UK

experience in these ways of working, and have set out the evidence for the likely effectiveness of such an approach. Pilot ‘children’s communities’ are now testing the approach in practice and are accompanied by a range of other area-based initiatives based on similar principles.

- In the US, the Strive initiative has shown what can be achieved by creating partnerships of both educational and non-educational players committed to developing a ‘cradle to career’ approach to improving educational outcomes (<http://www.strivetogether.org/>). The partnerships tend to operate on a wider geographical scale than Promise Neighborhoods - across and city regions (e.g. Greater Cincinnati, Washington DC, Boston, Greater Richmond)
- For the UK, Hodgson & Spours (2009, 2012, 2013) suggest the need to develop local ‘14+ Progression and Transition Boards’ (14+ PTB). These boards – at the metro level - would encompass a ‘vertical partnership’ of education providers, employers, regeneration agencies, voluntary and community organisations and local government. Their core agenda would comprise a range of issues central to student progression within the upper secondary phase (14–19) including improved career education, information and guidance; enhanced curriculum planning in the light of rapid national reform and improved progression pathways. The wider agenda would also encompass attempts to provide more apprenticeships; working with communities to create a stronger and more positive narrative about economic futures in the locality and economic and civic regeneration itself. This would therefore not just be an education agenda, but would be part of a comprehensive and ‘total place’ approach (LSIS 2010) that requires all stakeholders being able to see ecologies of local learning, training and development in their entirety and not just their part of it.
- Latterly, much interest has been generated by the potential of long-stay public-service institutions (notably, universities, school and hospitals) to serve as ‘anchor institutions’ in disadvantaged areas (see <http://pennur.upenn.edu/initiatives/national-anchor-institution-task-force-1>). In addition to their primary educational or medical roles, these institutions work collaboratively to improve conditions in the disadvantaged areas they serve, for instance by training and employing local people, resourcing local schools, undertaking health projects, or promoting adult learning. The scale of operation may be very local (the neighbourhood in which an institution is located) or, where a number of institutions collaborate, may extend across cities and city regions.

What each of these examples illustrates is the potential of coordinated approaches at a range of levels from neighbourhood to city region and beyond. The implication is that, alongside essential national frameworks, institutional autonomy and the residual roles of local authorities, there is a need for flexible responses which might be stimulated, supported and monitored at a metro and/or regional level. There may also be a need for formal governance frameworks at one or both of these levels – to develop education strategy, integrate it with economic and social strategies, and encourage and enable integrated structures and initiatives to develop at local level.

A further implication is that accountability needs to be fit for purpose. Holding individual institutions to account for their performance, and monitoring outcomes at a national level are both important. On their own, however, they run the risk of focusing the education system on ever-narrower targets which fail adequately to support the wider needs of local communities or wider regions. In the US, the idea of ‘collective impact’ (Kania and Kramer 2011) as a means of tackling deep-seated social problems is gaining traction, based on the simple proposition that efforts across a range of agencies and institutions is likely to make a greater difference than more fragmented efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

General Recommendations:

- Education should be a key part of ‘Northern Powerhouse’ discussions, enabling the development of stronger linkages between education and wider social and economic agendas.
- Instead of the current system which is both highly centralised and highly fragmented, a nested education system needs to emerge, with ‘metros’ as key players and learning and linkages between ‘metros’ across the North. The government should consult on how such a system might develop, particularly what formal governance structures are needed at different levels.
- Consideration should be given to the development of ‘collective accountability’ for the delivery of better education and well-being outcomes across ‘metro areas’.

Specific Recommendations:

- Building on the legacy of the Greater Manchester Challenge, further support should be provided for existing efforts to develop a self-improving school system within which schools support one another's improvement efforts.
- A Northern Teaching and Learning Centre should be established to strengthen teaching and learning through mutually supportive exchanges between practitioners and researchers.

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CONTACT DETAILS

Professor David Hall, Director, Manchester Institute of Education

Email: Dave.Hall@manchester.ac.uk

Tel: 0161-275-6946