

## 8

# The post-pandemic provision of education in the United Kingdom

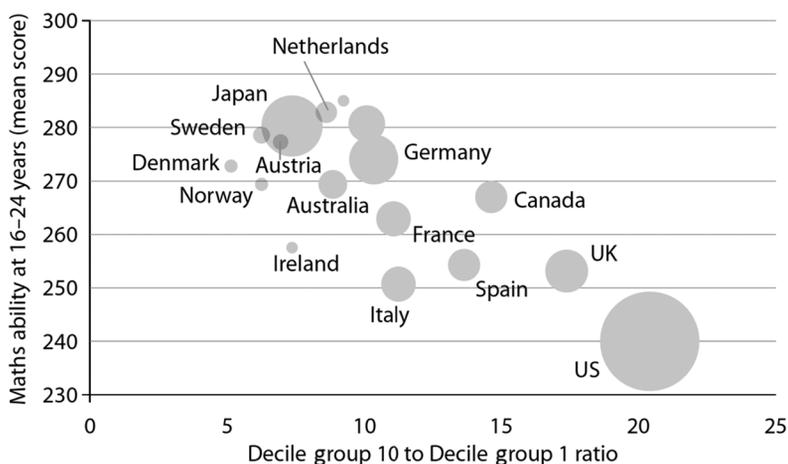
*Danny Dorling*

Education in England has been increasingly privatized. The result has not been good. It has not produced a better educational service. When international comparisons are made this becomes painfully clear. It has not become more efficient, because of a proliferation of private nurse classes, the academization of state schools, all new schools being free schools, university student number competition, and so on; it has not resulted in young people in England becoming more able – although it may have persuaded many to believe that they are very able and very clever despite not being able to speak and write in as many languages as children can do elsewhere in Europe – nor to show imaginative ability in mathematics and science (as well as many other subjects), as other young people in Europe can demonstrate when international comparisons are made.

Figure 8.1 gives a summary of the problem. It shows results for mathematics, but much the same can be seen for reading and problem solving. It uses data from 2012, as the repeat OECD organized international surveys taken in 2015 and 2018 did not measure ability up to age 24 but only around age 16. Schools in the United Kingdom are quite good at priming young people to produce an expected answer at age 16 or 18. However, by age 24 a great deal of what was taught in a UK school has been forgotten (greater than is the case in most other European countries, as Figure 8.1 makes clear).

As the figure implies, this *may* be related to economic inequality. The higher the economic inequality in a country, the worse the real educational performance.

What Figure 8.1 shows is not that economic inequality directly *causes* poor educational outcomes, but that a country such as the United Kingdom, which has become so economically unequal in recent decades, will tend to move in the direction of other very unequal countries, such



**Figure 8.1** Economic inequality and the mathematics ability of young adults up to age 24, 2012 (horizontal axis is the income ratio of top/bottom households groups)  
*Notes:* Countries are shown as circles sized by their respective populations. All countries for which there are data are included.

*Sources:* OECD (2013: tab. A2.7); income data from Dorling (2017).

as the United States. In contrast, in more equitable countries, such as Japan, Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark, education at school is carried out in such a way that, when young adults are later tested in their early twenties, they are still – on average – quite competent in mathematics. The figure for ability at age 16 is not shown here, but it demonstrates a looser association than that shown in Figure 8.1 between inequality and educational outcome, implying teaching to the test – to get what appear to be good educational outcomes, but which (by age 24) have become obviously less clearly good.

As education in the United Kingdom, and especially in England, has been transformed from a service to a commodity that can be bought and sold, it has lost a great deal of its real, transformative, value – while often becoming a very expensive commodity. Annual private school fees in England are the highest in Europe. In fact, most of Europe has almost no private education. Similarly, English university fees are the highest in Europe; many countries in Europe have no such fees, or, if they do, these fees are negligible. The United Kingdom in the past was not this exceptional, and it need not be in the future when education

is considered. We also need to understand that the United Kingdom is not just extreme when it comes to the European context. Private schools are less common and less costly in the richer US states; and, although Scotland still has free university tuition fees on average, in England the fees for attending university are even higher than those found across the United States. Affluent students avoid paying these fees, and the much larger loan repayments required if they are paid through a loan, by asking their parents to pay their university fees up front. Thus, in the United Kingdom, the poor who go to university pay more for an education.

The 2020 pandemic provides an opportunity to begin to take stock. It has highlighted inequalities in education in England in all kinds of ways, from the expenses of parents trying to look after their children when they were sent home from nurseries and schools in the spring of 2020 through to the fiasco of attempting the award of A level and GCSE grades in the late summer by a computer algorithm.

### **The debacle of August 2020**

On Thursday 13 August 2020 A level students in England were awarded their exam grades. These were not grades for exams they had actually sat, but predictions of what they would each have achieved had they sat them. A government agency called Ofqual had invented an algorithm to try to predict what grades the students would have received, had they sat the exams that had been cancelled because of the pandemic.

When the results were released anger began to mount. It quickly became apparent that young people attending private schools had been awarded a much higher uplift in marks than those attending state schools – marks that were closer to what their teachers had predicted they might get. This was because of the way in which the algorithm had been designed. If a school in England had a relatively small number of students sitting A level exams then the predictions of their teachers were chosen over a model based on past school performance. Private schools very often have small class sizes. The algorithm resulted in the number of top grades in private schools being inflated overall by 5 per cent on the previous year, and 10.4 per cent in one subject (classics), as compared to almost no inflation for large sixth-form colleges and larger state schools.

The algorithm was published on the same day as the results were released, in a 319-page report (Ofqual 2020). The report used the phrase “independent school” rather than private school. Use of language is important here. Private schools are private in the same way that private healthcare is private: you have to pay for it; access is dependent on ability to pay. One reason for the mounting anger was that it became apparent that the children of richer people were now being awarded much higher grades simply because their parents were rich, not because of anything the children had done. Each of the four other nations of the United Kingdom overturned the use of such predicted grades in the days before England did (at 4 p.m. on Monday 17 August).

The rest of Europe avoided any drama because schools in other European countries held exams or based the marks awarded to young people on continuous assessment. They tended to award higher-than-average grades in other European countries, as finally happened across all the United Kingdom by late August 2020. This may have been a result of students across Europe studying more before the exams as there was little else they could do under the various lockdowns; it may also be a consequence of greater leniency from the examiners, aware of the conditions under which students were working in the spring of 2020. Issues of fairness did not come to the fore elsewhere in Europe to anything like the extent to which they did in England, partly because other European countries have far fewer private schools than there are in the United Kingdom.

Imagine how students would have performed at their A levels had the exams actually been held in June 2020, as happened in other European countries. Would those from schools that were better resourced have done worse, as they would not have had the advantage of the school keeping them “keen” up until the very last minute? Would the very small minority who attended a boarding school have done particularly badly, taking their exams in some local assessment centre near their parents’ home instead of at that school? Almost all boarding schools had sent their children home when the pandemic began. Most importantly, would children from poorly resourced schools where few take A levels have actually done better than average, as they always had to rely disproportionately on their own ability and drive – even in the best of times? We will never know.

What we do know is that a rebellion led by students after they were unfairly awarded incorrect grades has resulted in far fewer being failed

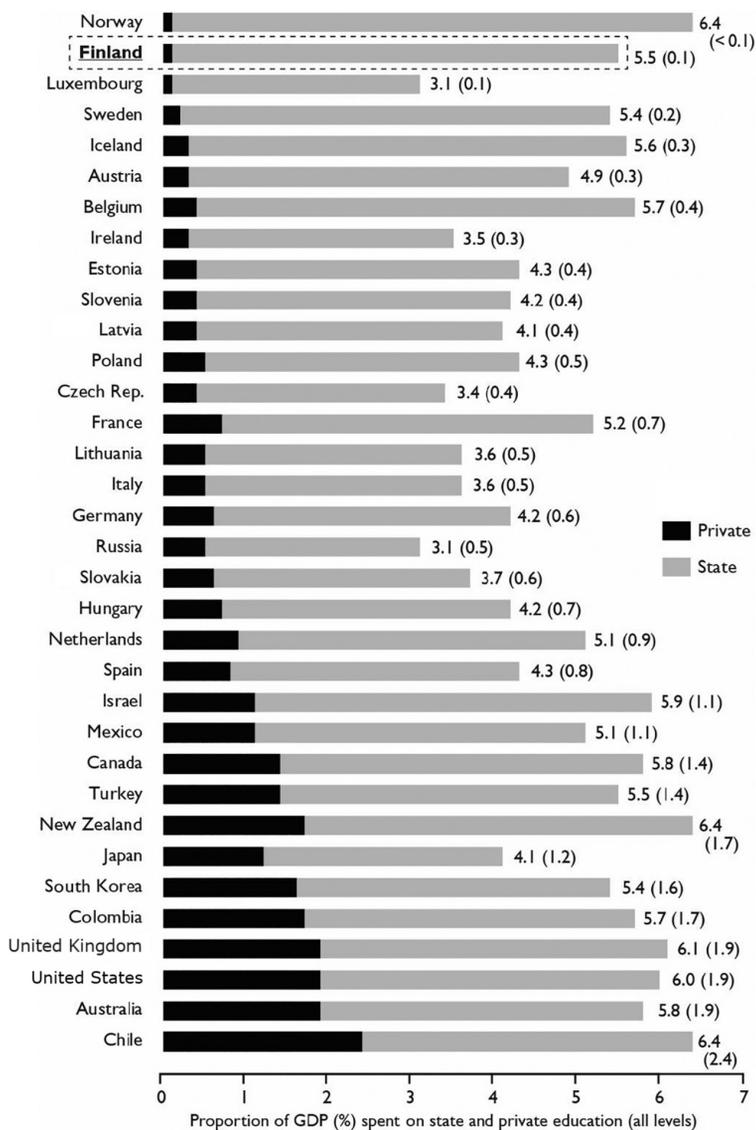
this year than ever before; and a very large number of GCSE grades are also now being revised upwards. The students who were most vocal on Twitter and on TV were often those predicted an A\* who had been given an A or a B, and denied entry to their university of choice; but by their actions they helped grade hundreds of thousands of their contemporaries up, almost all who had been awarded much lower grades. The contrast with the past could not be greater. Almost four decades ago, in a typical English state school, those few children who did take A levels took and largely failed them. Incidentally, it is worth remembering that almost every academic and researcher who attended a state school, but went on to study at university, did not attend a typical English state school (such are the inequalities between English state schools).

It is very fortunate that the results of the GCSE grades modelled by Ofqual in 2020 were never released, as the model used to predict them explicitly treated private schools differently. Within the 319-page report it suggested that, for those schools, “they have a different relationship between prior attainment and outcomes” (Ofqual 2020: 25). That “different relationship” is called coaching, and it results in far higher GCSE grades and then A levels being awarded than any model would predict based on actual ability or flair.

Figure 8.2 shows how dramatically the funding of state and private schools varies across OECD countries and how the United Kingdom is the most extreme outlier in Europe on this measure. Note that Finland is highlighted in Figures 8.2 and 8.3, as it is the European country most dissimilar to the United Kingdom in terms of educational achievements. Private school funding as a percentage of GDP is given in brackets at the end of the bars in the figure. The United Kingdom sits between Colombia (one of the most economically unequal countries in Latin America) and the United States (the most economically unequal large rich country in the world).

## What was so wrong before the pandemic?

Why does it matter economically if young UK adults are worse educated than in other affluent countries; or if the United Kingdom squanders such a high proportion of the funds it manages to find for secondary education on the tiny minority of children who attend private schools?

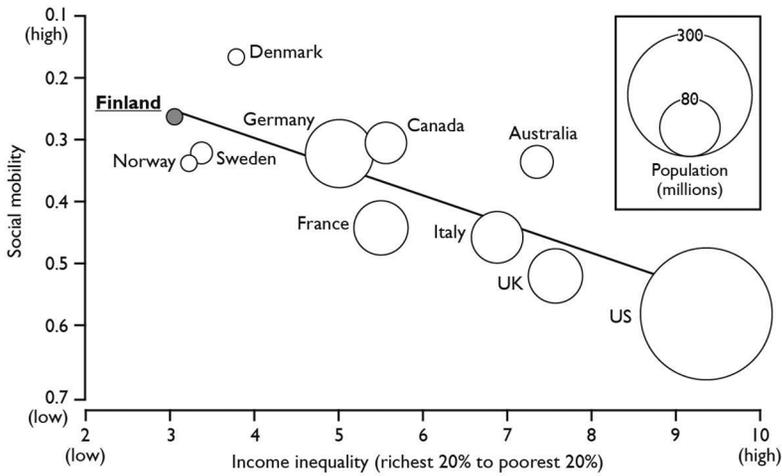


**Figure 8.2** State and private school spending, OECD countries, 2016

Notes: Data for Denmark, Greece and Switzerland are missing from OECD (2019).

Countries are sorted by the private percentage of the total amount.

Source: OECD (2019).



**Figure 8.3** Social mobility and income inequality, by affluent country, 2009

*Notes:* In this version the area of each circle is made proportional to the population of each country. The horizontal axis is the ratio of the income of the richest fifth of households to the poorest (Wilkinson & Pickett 2009: 17), and the vertical axis is the measure of elasticity as reported in Blanden (2009: tab. 1).

*Sources:* Redrawn from data provided in Wilkinson & Pickett (2009), based in turn on intergenerational mobility data in Blanden (2009).

Superficially, this creates inefficiencies, such as those created when private healthcare spending is high. Health overall then suffers, just as education overall suffers when private education is so dominant in a society. More importantly, the maintenance of such a system holds people back from doing what they could do best and forces others (the children of the affluent) to take jobs they might not be well suited to or enjoy. This results in much lower social mobility in the United Kingdom compared to other countries, as is demonstrated in Figure 8.3.

By academic subject, the narrowing of options becomes even more stark when viewed in terms of who studies what in a UK university at age 18. Table 8.1 shows those 86 degree-level subjects that 500 or more students studied in 2019. Human geography is studied by 12 young people from the most educationally affluent fifth of backgrounds for every one young person who studies it from the equally populous fifth of areas where young people are least likely to go to university. In the past human geographers often went into banking as a profession. In the

United Kingdom we have not been drawing our bankers from a wide cross-section of society. Economics ranked fifth out of the 86, finance 18th, marketing 34th and business studies 35th.

The UK education system as currently arranged funnels young people to educational destinations according to their parents' resources far more than other countries do, and – for those who go to university at age 18 – into subjects determined very much by their social and economic background. Thus, the lower-paid and more caring professions rank towards the bottom of Table 8.1. Being accepted to take a degree in social work ranks lowest (86th); nursing is at 81st place, teacher training at 74th; and childcare would also be low if we had enough people taking a degree in it for it to even feature in the table (in Nordic countries it is studied at masters level).

**Table 8.1** 86 subjects ranked by polar 5 to polar 1 ratio, UK universities age 18, 2019

Rank	Polar 1	Polar 5	Polar 1	All students	Ratio	Degree accepted to study in UK in 2019
1	4.23%	50.78%	95	2,245	12.00	L7: human and social geography
2	4.65%	51.16%	30	645	11.00	A2: pre-clinical dentistry
3	4.83%	46.90%	35	725	9.71	D1: pre-clinical veterinary medicine
4	5.15%	50.00%	35	680	9.71	Q8: classical studies
5	5.05%	47.05%	270	5,345	9.32	L1: economics
	5.32%	46.36%	230	4,325	8.72	L7 & F8 combined: all geography
6	6.02%	51.20%	50	830	8.50	R9: European languages and literature
7	6.54%	47.06%	50	765	7.20	RR: combinations within European languages
8	6.34%	45.32%	335	5,285	7.15	A1: pre-clinical medicine
9	4.46%	30.36%	25	560	6.81	B5: ophthalmics
10	6.67%	44.10%	65	975	6.61	V5: philosophy
11	6.49%	41.59%	135	2,080	6.41	F8: physical geographical sciences
12	7.21%	45.19%	75	1,040	6.27	Y: combinations of social studies/business/law with languages

**Table 8.1** (Continued)

Rank	Polar 1	Polar 5	Polar 1	All students	Ratio	Degree accepted to study in UK in 2019
13	7.01%	41.82%	135	1,925	5.97	Y: combinations of social studies/law with business
14	6.12%	36.05%	45	735	5.89	F6: geology
15	7.06%	41.00%	290	4,110	5.81	L2: politics
16	7.60%	44.13%	285	3,750	5.81	Z: combinations of 3 subjects and similar arrangements
17	6.45%	36.13%	50	775	5.60	F7: science of aquatic and terrestrial environment
18	7.27%	36.82%	80	1,100	5.06	N3: finance
19	7.39%	35.80%	95	1,285	4.84	K2: building
20	8.14%	37.74%	360	4,425	4.64	G1: mathematics
21	8.51%	38.65%	120	1,410	4.54	H8: chemical, process and energy engineering
22	8.69%	39.26%	455	5,235	4.52	N2: management studies
23	8.89%	40.00%	60	675	4.50	Y: combinations of languages
24	8.65%	38.78%	135	1,560	4.48	LL: combinations within social studies
25	8.84%	37.83%	285	3,225	4.28	Y: combinations of social studies/business/law with arts/humanities
26	9.35%	40.00%	540	5,775	4.28	V1: history by period
27	9.10%	38.40%	365	4,010	4.22	H3: mechanical engineering
28	8.29%	34.46%	160	1,930	4.16	H2: civil engineering
29	9.27%	37.86%	290	3,130	4.08	F3: physics
30	8.84%	35.99%	205	2,320	4.07	B1: anatomy, physiology and pathology
31	7.61%	30.98%	70	920	4.07	D4: agriculture
32	9.38%	37.50%	60	640	4.00	Y: combinations of physics/mathematics/computer sciences

(Continued)

**Table 8.1** (Continued)

Rank	Polar 1	Polar 5	Polar 1	All students	Ratio	Degree accepted to study in UK in 2019
33	9.38%	36.42%	380	4,050	3.88	C1: biology
34	9.09%	34.32%	200	2,200	3.78	N5: marketing
35	9.94%	36.77%	530	5,330	3.70	N1: business studies
36	10.25%	37.63%	290	2,830	3.67	Y: combinations of languages with arts/ humanities
37	9.93%	36.14%	265	2,670	3.64	H1: general engineering
38	9.57%	33.91%	220	2,300	3.54	K1: architecture
39	10.13%	34.97%	310	3,060	3.45	F1: chemistry
40	10.47%	35.39%	500	4,775	3.38	Q3: English studies
41	10.07%	33.68%	145	1,440	3.34	H6: electronic and electrical engineering
42	10.25%	33.50%	205	2,000	3.27	H4: aerospace engineering
43	11.03%	35.29%	75	680	3.20	VV: combinations within history and philosophy studies
44	11.11%	34.87%	145	1,305	3.14	Y: combinations of physics/mathematics with social studies/ business/law
45	11.30%	34.46%	100	885	3.05	L6: anthropology
46	10.75%	32.64%	285	2,650	3.04	C7: molecular biology, biophysics and biochemistry
47	10.84%	32.79%	630	5,810	3.02	NN: combinations within business and administrative studies
48	9.74%	27.01%	285	2,925	2.77	N4: accounting
49	11.84%	32.03%	425	3,590	2.71	W3: music
50	10.70%	28.79%	275	2,570	2.69	B2: pharmacology, toxicology and pharmacy
51	10.04%	26.25%	130	1,295	2.61	C9: others in biological sciences
52	11.54%	29.80%	740	6,410	2.58	W2: design studies
53	12.14%	31.07%	125	1,030	2.56	C3: zoology

**Table 8.1** (Continued)

Rank	Polar 1	Polar 5	Polar 1	All students	Ratio	Degree accepted to study in UK in 2019
54	11.34%	27.53%	140	1,235	2.43	Y: combinations of social studies/law
55	12.30%	29.53%	910	7,400	2.40	I1: computer science
56	12.11%	28.13%	155	1,280	2.32	P5: journalism
57	12.65%	28.77%	1660	1,3120	2.27	C8: psychology
58	12.11%	27.21%	425	3,510	2.25	P3: media studies
59	13.64%	30.30%	90	660	2.22	WW: combinations within creative arts and design
60	12.67%	28.02%	1485	11,725	2.21	M1: law by area
61	13.61%	30.00%	415	3,050	2.20	W6: cinematography and photography
62	13.29%	29.11%	105	790	2.19	Y: combinations of arts/humanities
63	11.48%	25.14%	105	915	2.19	B8: medical technology
64	12.18%	26.24%	615	5,050	2.15	B9: others in subjects allied to medicine
65	12.96%	27.23%	640	4,940	2.10	L3: sociology
66	13.44%	27.97%	305	2,270	2.08	N8: hospitality, leisure, sport, tourism and transport
67	13.77%	27.29%	285	2,070	1.98	Y: combinations of science/engineering with social studies/business/law
68	12.68%	24.88%	130	1,025	1.96	M2: law by topic
69	14.23%	27.64%	175	1,230	1.94	Y: combinations of science/engineering with arts/humanities/languages
70	13.49%	25.12%	145	1,075	1.86	W1: fine art
71	13.51%	24.66%	200	1,480	1.83	Y: combinations of medical/biological/agricultural sciences
72	14.42%	25.80%	450	3,120	1.79	W4: drama
73	14.25%	24.97%	1130	7,930	1.75	C6: sport and exercise science

(Continued)

**Table 8.1** (Continued)

Rank	Polar 1	Polar 5	Polar 1	All students	Ratio	Degree accepted to study in UK in 2019
74	13.35%	22.89%	420	3,145	1.71	X1: training teachers
75	16.09%	25.29%	140	870	1.57	I3: software engineering
76	14.60%	21.17%	100	685	1.45	I2: information systems
77	15.89%	22.43%	85	535	1.41	II: combinations in computer sciences
78	17.48%	23.79%	180	1,030	1.36	D3: animal science
79	16.53%	21.49%	100	605	1.30	W5: dance
80	15.28%	19.82%	505	3,305	1.30	X3: academic studies in education
81	17.01%	19.23%	1150	6,760	1.13	B7: nursing
82	19.20%	20.40%	240	1,250	1.06	F4: forensic and archaeological science
83	20.27%	20.95%	150	740	1.03	L4: social policy
84	19.14%	19.47%	290	1,515	1.02	M9: others in law
85	21.84%	19.16%	285	1,305	0.88	I6: games
86	21.53%	14.85%	435	2,020	0.69	L5: social work

Notes: Polar 5 are small geographical neighbourhoods where the most educationally and economically advantaged fifth of young people in the United Kingdom reside, and Polar 1 are the neighbourhoods where the most disadvantaged fifth live. Data are rounded to the nearest five in the original source files to preserve anonymity. A combined geography total added (unranked). Data first published here: <https://blog.geographydirections.com/2020/08/21/geography-and-the-shifting-ratios-of-inequality-university-a-levels-and-gcses-in-2020>. Source: Kernohan (2020).

Jobs in care are relatively cheap jobs. In June 2020 it was revealed that a 2.5 per cent GDP investment by the government in care – increasing the numbers working in care to 10 per cent of the employed population, as it is in Sweden and Denmark – and raising the pay of all care workers to the real living wage would create 2 million jobs, all at the real living wage (De Henau & Himmelweit 2020). This would increase the overall employment rate by five percentage points and reduce the gender employment gap by four percentage points. In a comparison made in that report with a similar-sized investment in construction, the authors found not only that the Treasury would recoup 50 per cent

more in direct and indirect tax revenues from investment in care but that investing in care would also create nearly three times as many jobs – over six times as many for women and 10 per cent more for men. And, since investment in care is greener than construction, a care-led recovery would be a green-led recovery.

Although the report's authors did not make the point, had they chosen to look at the finance industry as their comparison (rather than construction), they would have found that only slightly more jobs would be created – and that is before the merit and value of the jobs is even considered.

### **What may change after the height of the pandemic?**

At first, not much may appear to change as the pandemic subsides. However, at the university level many more students will now have begun studies in September 2020 in UK universities, as exam grades were based on teacher predictions of how the students would have performed “on a good day”. At the very least, this will help reduce youth unemployment in the autumn of 2020; at most, it will widen horizons and possibilities. It will also bring the day closer when it is realized that the English student loans system is unsustainable, because these students will not be being paid an amount in future that would repay the loans.

The United Kingdom, and most especially England, needs to look again at how universities across the mainland of Europe are organized and financed. On 26 July 2020 it was announced that the UK government would be bailing out up to 13 UK universities that were at immediate risk of insolvency as a result of the pandemic and the way in which UK universities had been marketized and privatized. However, the government initially was offering only loans to institutions. This is no long-term solution.

At schools and further education colleges more students will be studying for A levels and other qualifications in the two years ahead, more doing what they have chosen to do than ever before, thanks to the huge uplift in GCSE results that occurred in August 2020 when the exam board results were not used.

More children doing what they have actually chosen to do is a very good thing. However, they will be struggling to do this in the mess of semi-privatized academy chains and other aberrations that were created by government ministers in the last decade or so in a desperate attempt to bring a market into state education. In a time with fewer and fewer resources available as international trade reduces, this will simply be too expensive a situation to continue to tolerate.

At the height of the mess in education in the United Kingdom is its extremely elitist system of private education, which shuts the vast majority of young people out of a privileged education system. At the same time, it uses up a huge proportion of funds, general school staff, teachers, teaching assistants, playing fields, buildings and money on a very small number of young people, most of whom do not actually need any extra help and would do perfectly well in the state system. Given the depth of the recession we are in, it will be interesting to see the extent to which some of these schools become, in effect, nationalized as parents cannot afford to pay the fees in future. Fewer extremely affluent school students are also expected to be flying in from abroad in future as the after-effects of the pandemic rumble on.

Governments in future will also need to consider the proliferation of private nursery provision that made childcare for younger children so very expensive. During the pandemic many such nurseries insisted that parents carry on paying even though they would or could not take their children. In other countries childcare is arranged differently and is not commodified to this extent. Here it is a source of great personal profit for the owner of a private nursery, who often pays the employees very lowly too. In the past there were more imaginative forms of childcare in the United Kingdom – and more cooperative ones as well (including both playgroups and summer play schemes, which I was employed in a long time ago). We need to learn not only from other countries; we can also learn from our past.

Older adult education is often forgotten, and it is only an afterthought here. But with possible mass unemployment, with more leisure time in the “new normal”, we should look at it again. If shopping for things you do not really need is to stop being the great recreation and spending activity it once was; if people are to have time freed up from commuting; if the very elderly are going to have to isolate more often for some time to come; perhaps the very least we can do is begin to provide more older

adult education. The pandemic has taught us how to teach remotely, but not (yet) how to teach well remotely.

One final point: we have to remember the disadvantage we have over where we are starting from. I am a human geographer, and, as mentioned above, Table 8.1 shows that my academic subject now collects together more young people from a privileged background than any other – and, in fact, by 2019 more than it had for many years. The pandemic will have altered that. A level grading by teacher opinion means that we geographers do not expect to head this table when data for 2020 are made available in 2021. However, when the two parts of geography (human and physical) are combined, there is just one large mainstream school subject that is even more exclusive in its intake of students. That subject ranks fifth in the table; it is economics. We should not expect economics graduates in the United Kingdom to have a wide knowledge of education – in fact, they are even more narrowly educated in terms of their experiences of living in different areas of the country than are geographers (both types combined). Better policy is going to have to be drawn up by a wider range of people than simply social scientists from the most elite of social sciences!

### Further reading

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