

The seagulls circle overhead and the waves lap gently at the shore as the sun breaks through the clouds in Blackpool. On the pier, the tourist train rolls slowly past the amusement arcades and the candy floss shop down to the painted horses galloping around the carousel.

There is still a nostalgic "kiss me quick" feel to this Lancashire coastal town. In some ways it feels as if little has changed since the pier first opened in 1863 but the paint is peeling and many of the shops along the promenade are boarded up. The B&Bs have been turned into bedsits for a transient population as budget airlines divert holidaymakers to warmer destinations.

For years Blackpool has been portrayed as a symbol of social and economic decline, a town on the margins both physically and metaphorically. Even the political parties have stopped hosting their conferences here. The Legatum Institute recently ranked it as the least prosperous local authority in the UK. Unemployment and welfare dependency are high. Blackpool has the lowest life expectancy in the country and the highest rate of drug deaths. Two thirds of adults and almost a quarter of children are obese. Schools are improving but in 2019 only about a quarter of children got two good GCSEs in English and maths.

That could all be about to change. Last October a superfast fibre optic cable was installed under the sea, linking Blackpool to the United States, Dublin and Denmark through the North Atlantic Loop. Data can now travel faster to New York from here than it can from London. Blackpool wants to reinvent itself as "Silicon Sands", a digital hub for tech businesses taking advantage of one of the fastest internet connections in Britain. But, with bitter irony, local leaders claim their efforts are being thwarted by the shortcomings of the education system.

Frank Norris, chairman of the Blackpool Education Improvement Board and an adviser to the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, says the narrowness of the curriculum and the inflexibility of the assessment system are preventing local schools and colleges from giving students the skills they need to get the good jobs that will be created by the arrival of the fibre optic link. The computer science GCSE is so heavily focused on coding that pupils in most schools only take it if they are in the top set for maths. There is a similar problem with the A-level curriculum and just 5 per cent of students taking the subject are girls.

Local colleges worry that their students will fail the new vocational T-levels, launched last year, because they involve work placements, which are in short supply in Blackpool. "It's such a wasted opportunity," says Norris. "Many more of the students are capable of doing the new jobs that will become available but there's absolutely no flexibility in the qualification. Businesses are looking for creativity and collaborative working, they want people who can challenge or see things in a different way but we have created an exam sausage machine that doesn't assess these things."

In Blackpool, where every social problem is magnified after decades of deprivation, this is a disaster. Many pupils do not have the chance to broaden their experience outside of school and

aspiration is a difficult concept in families with a long history of unemployment. Paul Turner, the council's assistant director for education, says: "Gavin Williamson [the education secretary] talks about learning Latin but in Blackpool we want children to know there's a route into the workplace."

Already the better-paid digital jobs are going elsewhere. The IT company Atos, one of the biggest local employers, has a call centre in Blackpool and is keen to hire more staff but it has struggled to recruit. Its nearest software engineer lives in Stockport, 60 miles away, and there is intense competition for jobs from abroad.

Ben Murphy, the company's chief digital officer, compares the fibre optic cable to a valuable natural resource. "You have got the oil pipeline," he says, "but have you got the refinery here?" He explains that schools are churning out students who lack the problem-solving ingenuity his business needs and that coding is the wrong skill to learn because it is increasingly being done by machines. "We get exam results and we have no trust in what competence that offers an individual."

As schools return for the new academic year, the education system is still reeling from the impact of the pandemic. The consequences of months of lost learning and the latest round of grade inflation will continue to resonate for years to come. There are worries about another Covid surge and whether younger pupils should be vaccinated. Beyond the immediate crisis, however, there are profound questions about what children learn, how they are assessed and the purpose of education.

Lord O'Neill of Gatley, the former chairman of Goldman Sachs Asset Management who helped to set up the Northern Powerhouse Partnership as a Treasury minister, believes the conundrum in Blackpool is symptomatic of a wider flaw. "The Department for Education has a far too centralised national approach to everything," he told me.

"Levelling up can mean endless things but ultimately creating opportunity for all is what it has to be about, and the education system is hindering that because it's too rigid. It's tragic."

Benjamin Silverstone, a fellow at Warwick University, says there is a similar mismatch between qualifications and employment when it comes to battery technology. The prime minister has promised that battery development will drive investment from Cornwall to Thurso, creating thousands of high-wage jobs, but Silverstone believes the exam system will make this commitment hard to deliver. "My concern is that a kid says, 'I want to do my engineering T-level because in two years that job is going to be there' but that T-level doesn't fit them for it because there isn't anything in there about battery technologies, electrification or power electronics."

He asked one of the recruiters for Britishvolt, which is building a huge electric car battery "gigafactory" in Northumberland, who was being hired. "He said, 'We've got lots of engineers, most from abroad? France, Spain, North America, China. That's where a lot of people are applying from because we simply don't have the skill set in this country'," Silverstone reports.

Boris Johnson has described his government's plans for training and skills as "rocket fuel" for levelling up the nation. The white paper published earlier this year promised to give adults the opportunity to retrain in later life through a "lifetime skills guarantee" and involve companies in local

skills plans. These are admirable proposals but the national curriculum has been explicitly designed to "introduce pupils to the best that has been thought and said" rather than prepare them for work.

Sir Charlie Mayfield, the former chairman of John Lewis and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, is now chairman of QA, which trains over 200,000 people each year in digital skills. "We've ended up in a situation where the world of education and the world of work are almost more separate than they've ever been," he says. "It's crazy and very unfortunate for a lot of people."

This is a problem for students but also for the economy. The Department for Education's own Employer Skills Survey showed that in 2019 nearly a quarter of all vacancies were caused by skill shortages, an increase of 2 per cent over the previous two years. A survey by McKinsey last year found that 87 per cent of business leaders say they have, or are expecting, serious skills shortages and 44 per cent of employers feel that young people leaving school, college or university are not "work-ready".

In a written submission to The Times Education Commission, Mayfield suggests the failure to address the skills gap could cost the UK £140 billion in lost GDP by 2028. "Standards in education have always been measured by exams, assessments and grades, so it's not surprising that this has been the focus," Mayfield writes. "However, this is increasingly at the expense of what employers really value ... resilience, communication and problem solving. How much time do young people spend developing those skills while studying for the mark scheme?"

A growing number of employers are ignoring exam results in favour of their own assessments. The accountancy firm PwC no longer uses GCSEs or A-level grades to select trainees. Instead, it runs its own psychometric tests to determine candidates' approach to risk, analytical skills and emotional intelligence. Laura Hinton, the company's chief people officer, told the commission this was a better way of finding the most talented and diverse recruits. "It's about having different perspectives and that leads to better solutions for our clients."

Dame Sharon White, who succeeded Mayfield at the John Lewis Partnership, says her company is increasingly relying on online assessment because it has lost faith in state-run exams. "We try as far as possible to set to one side people's qualifications ? they turn out not to be a very good indicator of how well somebody will do in the partnership," she explained. "The system has become even more narrow, limited and box-ticking."

Education should in her view be much broader and move from "rote learning and memorisation" to "skills like project management, assessing children on teamwork and the ability to make a product". That might, she says, be better done through more continuous assessment than exams. "It's very rare that there are any work tasks where you have two and a quarter hours to get from A to B. The way in which assessments are done [should be] mirroring the world of work." Pupils are also in her view forced to specialise too early, with many choosing between sciences and humanities after GCSEs. "I wouldn't have a separate step at 16. I would look at a high school diploma which is sufficiently broad for those who are going down a more or less academic route."

The inventor Sir James Dyson agrees. "It makes me sad and concerned that schools are failing to teach creativity," he writes in his new book, *Invention*. "Yet life today demands it more than ever."

The advantage in the West that we have relied upon for so long is being diminished."

There is a near-consensus in the worlds of business, science and the creative industries, yet the disconnect between education and employment is not a coincidence, it is a choice. In March Nick Gibb, the schools minister, wrote a piece for ConservativeHome in which he argued that: "We must strongly resist the calls from those who talk about ripping up our curriculum to make it more 'relevant' or to make it solely about preparing pupils for work."

The ideological divide in education at the moment is not between left and right, it is between "knowledge" and "skills". Like Michael Gove, the former education secretary, Gibb champions a "knowledge-rich curriculum". He denounces what he calls "generic skills" such as creativity, team working and problem solving as "one of the most damaging myths in education". These are, he suggests, peddled by "progressives" who want to take the education system backwards.

Many Conservatives profoundly disagree.

Robert Halfon, the Tory chairman of the Commons education committee, insists that the "fundamental purpose" of education must be to prepare pupils for work. "It's all very well if everybody knows the name of every fish and every river, but if they don't know how to fish they're not going to be able to provide a meal for themselves". Paul Maynard, the Conservative MP for Blackpool North, says there needs to be much more flexibility if young people in his constituency are to have the chance of getting the good jobs that are on offer. "The interpretation of Shakespeare doesn't change from one generation to the next but in IT fashions change very quickly and the curriculum and qualifications need to keep up." The former education secretary Lord Baker of Dorking describes Gibb as "an Edwardian figure in a digital age."

Over the last two decades there have been huge improvements in schools. The emphasis on standards, discipline and rigour have led to better outcomes for many pupils but the gap between disadvantaged students and their wealthier peers remains stubbornly high. Education seems pointless for too many children who cannot see a connection to their future lives.

Making the curriculum and qualifications more relevant to the workplace might engage them and would not have to mean dumbing down.

The truth is the distinction between knowledge and skills is a false divide. Of course children need to learn facts and figures but they should also be given the chance to develop the qualities that will help them get and hold down a job. Schools should be encouraged to foster curiosity and build character rather than just chasing after grades. Lucy Kellaway, the former journalist who quit to become a teacher and is now a member of The Times Education Commission, says "it is ridiculous and depressing" that the debate has become so polarised.

"The whole Govian thing is very culty, and you can't disagree with it without being the devil. It shouldn't be a matter of being a true believer. Knowledge and skills both matter, you need creativity and facts."

As education secretary, Gove railed against "the Blob" of those resisting reform, so it is curious that it is his disciples who seem most reluctant to embrace change.

After Johnson became prime minister he summoned Williamson to Downing Street to discuss education reform. "There was nothing there," says one witness. "Boris had two ideas. He said, 'When I was at school we would rank the children from 1 to 250 and that's the kind of competitive spirit I want to introduce'. The other was more Classics teaching. There wasn't much levelling up going on in that discussion."

As the prime minister knows better than most, every crisis is also an opportunity. He could improve the education system and level up the disadvantaged parts of the country by ending the false divide between knowledge and skills and giving young people in Blackpool the chance to get the jobs they deserve.

Rachel Sylvester chairs The Times Education Commission

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Employers value resilience, communication and problemsolving. How much time do young people spend on those skills while studying for the mark scheme?

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

Rachel Sylvester, 'Spoon-fed pupils are far from ready for our high-tech future - WEEKEND ESSAY Blackpool hopes to become the 'Silicon Sands' of the northwest but employers there and across the country complain that schools fail to prepare the young for work, says Rachel Sylvester', *Times, The* (online), 4 Sep 2021 30,31 <<https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=UKNB&doref=news/184D28ADCCC1E650>>

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