

Big Issues for the Cambridge Area

Notes from the discussion session of the U3AC meeting of 8 Nov 2017

Session led by Mal Scholfield

Notes by Howard Biddle and Kate Kirk

Education and skills

Peter presented five broad areas of concern; under-performance of some local schools and the achievement of low qualifications, the importance of non-academic qualifications, links between business and schools, the supply and retention of teachers, and skills shortages for businesses – not just for high-tech companies, but also skills such as handling sophisticated agricultural machinery and HGV drivers.

Mal started the session by observing that in his opinion, 50% of Peter's introduction had been fact and 50% opinion and that we need to be cautious about acting on assumption rather than fact.

1. Encouraging the uptake of STEM subjects

Technology is essential for growth; the question is where the skills will come from. More females taking STEM subjects could help. At GCSE, the split between male and female is 50:50. This drops to 33% female by 'A' level, a proportion which continues into further education in physics and computing. In biology the split is 50:50 and in medicine, 70% of students are female.

More people of both genders are needed in STEM but without jeopardising the 'creative' industries, which are an important contributor to GDP.

We should not forget life-long learning which can contribute to the skills base overall and it is increasingly the case that people will need to retrain several times during their career.

2. Developing vocational skills

The centrally created curriculum has reduced time available for extra-curricular activities such as performing arts which are helpful for developing confidence and social skills and art. It was suggested that fewer parents are volunteering to help with extra-curricular activities such as after-school clubs due to the levels of DBS checking required.

Too large a proportion of students are expected to go to university which depletes the numbers taking vocational skills. We need more people in construction and we need more support technicians both of which can provide well-paid jobs. There is concern that some jobs are too low paid to be sustainable in Cambridge.

Special Educational Needs assistance is provided for 15% of students although only 2.5% are 'Statemended'. It was not known whether this was an appropriate level or not. SEN schools have been abolished to encourage integration but schools with SEN resources can be penalised because their results are adversely affected in the league tables.

3. Shortage of teachers, schools and colleges

The shortage of teachers is exacerbated by too much bureaucracy in meeting league tables and insufficient, reasonably-priced housing. Independent schools such as the Leys can afford to provide teacher housing but this is not an option for the state sector. Class sizes are suffering as a result.

Universities are under huge funding pressure and this can lead to the provision of spurious subjects in order to attract students – although it was also thought that central allocation of funding supposedly directs funds towards subject areas that are lacking. There was a question whether principals are overpaid.

There is a concern that builders have an incentive to create new developments in rural areas which are below the threshold for mandating the provision of a new school. This puts pressure on local schools and the transport system alike.

The government is opposed to VI form colleges but there is a danger with small VI forms that, unlike the colleges, only relatively few subjects can be offered. Hills Road gets less money per pupil than secondary schools, hence the drive to increase numbers and class sizes at the College.

The UTC has difficulty recruiting students – because the starting age is 14, which doesn't match with the age when children normally transfer from one school to another.