

# Speech: Future Education – A Father's Perspective

Education is an increasingly complicated business, and you are all experts, which left me wondering how I should approach this speech to you today;

Should I come to you as Paul Rennie, DHM Malaysia, and regional head of the British Government's ASEAN Education campaign, spouting numbers and stats about futures and impacts;

Or should I draw from my experience as a governor of a leading international school in Kuala Lumpur, and explain how the market is shifting around us, and the challenges that governors face to read the tea leaves;

But in the end I decided it would probably be far more useful to talk to you about none of that, and instead talk to you straightforwardly as the father of a six-year old daughter. Because, as someone who hopes to be a customer of your services for the next decade and a bit, I can tell you that I am utterly terrified about the future;

Now this is not some dystopian monologue about global warming, deforestation, or the extinction of species – though all of them are things my daughter has already lobbied me on. Instead it is a recognition of the competing demands that education is going to place on my daughter, and on me, and ultimately on you;

I will start with my first favourite statistic – that 90% of the jobs that my daughter is likely to apply for by 2032 don't exist yet. Think back to the six-year olds of 2003. How many of their parents planned for them to be social media strategists, app designers, iphone engineers – how many of them thought they would get a nice stable job at Nokia;

And those trends of globalisation are not limited to jobs that don't exist yet;

I look down the road, and see that globalisation is going to be pushing work up, as well as down. Mega companies will become even more mega, but at the same time harder to get into. While the market for the self-employed entrepreneur, these job makers not job takers, is going to explode;

Work will become more cross cultural and more international, which means a boy like me, who grew up, went to school, and went to university within five miles of the hospital he was born in, getting a job with an international company, let alone the Foreign Ministry will seem like an absurdity. (Joke though I know Scotland remains on the brink of being a foreign country to the UK);

The ability to scale at speed will continue. It took Ford Motor Company a little over a century to sell 350 million cars; Apple sold 1 billion iPhones in nine years. That, frankly, isn't a world I grew up in;

What I would call 'Combinativity', the ability to merge different ideas and product together, is likely to become more important than pure creativity, and that will require a broad understanding of the world – but if you don't specialise, how will you ever get ahead?

Yet what I don't believe will change is people. In fact those people skills are likely to become more important as automation becomes more prevalent. But would we give up on learning French because we perfected the Babel Fish (as only Hitchikers Guide to the Galaxy fans would understand);

So where does all of that leave my daughter – where does that leave schools? Because one of the biggest challenges in the sector is risk aversion, which is something that I absolutely share as a parent – and you probably need to help me not to;

My father, for example, went on a journey that involved going to school five days a week; sitting a series of individual exams; going to university and then applying to a company for a job;

I went on a journey that involved going to school; sitting individual exams with a bit of individual course work; going to university (to sit more individual exams) and then applying to a company;

My daughter is going to school right now, and at the end of the pathway I still see A-Levels, or IBs, and then University. Because grades matter, and that is what I demand, and what schools live and die by, but is that enough?

Well it's not enough for me as a parent, which is why I begin to make extortionate demands of you. I want, obviously, straight As, but I also want you to have a drama studio that could host a west-end musical; sports facilities that could hold the 2020 Olympics; and a design and technology centre that could put a probe on the moon.

It is a virtual arms race at international schools, to the point where even Universities are struggling to keep their tech current with what the kids are used to. And it's all because I want you to keep doing the traditional stuff, but also help her to find her niche;

And that is a challenge for me as a parent, in letting go and trusting schools. One headmaster told me that 90% of everything we know about the human brain we have learned in the last ten years. That's staggering, but it also post-dates everything about my school experience that I rely on to help my daughter;

Most of you will be familiar with the phonics system of learning to read. I wasn't. I learned to read via a series of little slips of paper with words written on them, kept in an old tobacco tin (spelling smelled like Virginia Gold Leaf until I was ten). It was a huge leap of faith to go with phonics – but it is incredible;

And then there are topics now that I don't even understand, like coding. I always knew the day would come when I lost track of what my daughter was studying, I have never been much of a scientist so if it came to GCSE

Chemistry she was on her own. But to have you six year old daughter teaching you how to use coding programme Light Bot on the iPad, well, I thought I would have more time. (In fact, I got cocky after that and tried to do some of the Year 5 coding activities on the EducationCity website – I got 27%);

She needs those skills, she needs these new ways of learning, but how do schools help to take me as a parent on that journey?

If someone had said to my parents when I was at school they were going to put me up for an exam in game design, they would have wondered what I was going to do with a degree in PacMan, and yet today the games industry is worth more than Hollywood;

There is also the challenge of the cultural shift, which I get glimmers of being here in an international environment, but those in the UK probably don't see as clearly.

There is little doubt in my mind that the century belongs to Asia, if nothing else they have demographics on their side. There are 140m people under the age of 14 in ASEAN alone, and another 100m yet to be born by 2030. They will be going for those global jobs at the mega corporations too;

Even at six, frankly even in pre-school, it was a startling revelation to see what people have termed 'tiger parenting' in action. I'd heard of it, but when you see it in practise, it is both terrifying, but also incredible to see what some children can achieve with that level of investment;

And while it is absolutely not what I want for my child, I realise that as long as the main determinant of University entrance are is still the grades, then that is what my daughter is up against. I find that I have become a bit more like that myself, though probably better described as dwarf leopard than Tiger – but is that right? Should schools be taking a view?

Because when you look to places like Malaysia, you can see the churn in the education sector in all its glory. You have long established schools, and new entrants. For profit, not for profit, and even a few in between. And that innovation in the market means schools have to keep up;

Like in the UK, where around 150,000 children will sit GCSE French, compared to about 4,000 doing Mandarin or Cantonese. Is that imbalance because schools there have carefully thought about the future needs of a British work force when set against growing export markets; or is because we have lots of French teachers, and it's what their parents learned?

But while it may be easier for new entrant schools to ditch 'traditions' there is also the danger of getting caught by fad-ism. Just as someone once described a leader with no followers as simply a person taking a walk, so if you are pioneers in every new field it might turn out to be no field at all – just ask all the people who have big collections of laser discs;

And obviously as a parent I want you to do both. I want a massive French department, as well as a fully staffed Chinese department, and what about Spanish while we're at it. Because I want you to give her all the skills to

be at the cutting edge when she graduates, but I don't want you to bet her future on it in case she gets it wrong;

It is impossible, and I know every time as a Governor when teaching colleagues come with the next big idea, that schools will have to do all of the above without putting a single penny on tuition fees;

But I also have more fundamental worries as a parent about my daughter's education, particularly in the international sphere;

Multiculturalism is amazing, but does becoming a global citizen risk becoming a citizen of nowhere? I didn't leave Edinburgh until I was twenty one. My daughter is half British, half Dutch, was born in India, and now lives in Malaysia. I have a very clear idea of where I am from, does she, will she, or is that an absurd thing to wonder about? One thing is for sure, I can't draw on personal experience to help, so do I rely on the teachers who will be steering her in four year chunks as I move around the world – is that your role?

And I worry about the digital and online world, because I know I will always lag in my understanding of it, like my parents did, as teachers probably do. As a tech thinker once told me, if you describe a technology as disruptive, it shows you are already too old to understand it – people who disrupt aren't disrupting, they are just living. And because nothing ever dies online, can she have fun at school, and yet still start as an adult with a clean slate, as I did?

Which merges into the digital world blurring the lines between home and school, particularly in the future. As her personal life and school life merge into a single iPad, will she ever be able to switch off? And in that space, does it mean she can now take her bullying home with her, and nobody will ever know? Maybe by the time she is fourteen there will be teachers around her who have personal experience of being trolled by cyber bullies and can help, but I suspect few of your teachers could claim that – but does it matter? Is that what your Year 12s and 13s are there for, to bridge the gap?

And, obviously, I worry about the cost of all of this, in a world of shrinking budgets and resources, will I be able to keep her in the schools that are offering her all these opportunities, or will you end up pricing me out of the market, as you keep up with my demands?

There is a lot ahead of you, the margins of success become ever smaller at A-Grade; there is more competition than ever; the reputational risks are only growing; and to meet all the demands I've listed you're going to need a body of staff that is both multi-talented and specialised – who is going to train them for you, and what will they cost? Sadly, we will not all be investors in Snap to pay for it all.

But in spite of these worries, the final thought I would leave you with is my huge pride, and belief, in the British education model I see in international schools today (and I would say that even if my government weren't paying me to). I think it does have tradition as well as modernity; I think it puts a

lot of trust in its teachers, rather than wrote structures; and I think it gives children a wide exposure, but still creates a sense of belonging.

I wish you every success in the conference, and look forward to fruitful discussions. You have great challenges, and even greater responsibilities, and parents like me will need your help more than ever in the future.