

Speech: Op-ed by British Ambassador Thomas Reilly on education

In 2006, when I moved back to London after nearly four years in the Middle East, to get married and start a family, I also went back to school. The British Foreign Office paid for me to study for an MBA. I studied in the evening after work, at weekends and holidays and took time off work to attend residential schools. At the end of four years, I had my MBA.

Education matters.

It matters at all points in our lives. It shapes our lives. It structures the way we think. It develops the way we interact with other people. It enables us to realise our own potential. It helps us challenge ourselves. Education is the bedrock on which we stand, it sets the pathway for our lives. Without it we are (to quote Shakespeare) 'bound in shallows and in misery'. A failure to educate effectively stunts personal development and economic growth, increasing, as it does so, political and societal risks. Education is a liberator, an equaliser, a generator of social mobility and a realiser of opportunity. A good education is the single greatest gift we can give our children.

For the children we educate today, create our societies tomorrow. The values we impart through our children's education shape how we will live – in a just, equal society where people are respected for their abilities; or an unjust, crippled society where people are respected only for their wealth or their power.

But education should not be viewed as a solely academic undertaking. A society that fails to develop and apply skills and knowledge will struggle to sustain economic growth. This is increasingly, recognised by companies and universities who offer combined syllabi where equal parts of the course are spent in each institution.

Education is not easy. Indeed, it is frequently scary and difficult. This September, my children went (with great fear and trepidation) to their first day at a brand-new school here in Morocco. Their fear was compounded by it not only being the first day in a new school, in a new country, but also by the fact that it was a French-speaking school and neither of them speak French. But in years to come, when both of them are bilingual, I hope they will look back on that fear and realise that the experience was worth it.

The process of learning never stops and it is not something that the young alone do. When my mother retired, she went back to university and studied first an undergraduate degree in Spanish and then a Masters, writing a ground-breaking dissertation on the Spanish in South America. When she graduated, in Canterbury Cathedral last year, in front of 5,000 other students, they stood and applauded her. It was one of proudest moments of my life.

Where education liberates, a failure to educate chains and limits, perpetuates inequality and locks communities into a cycle of poverty. One of the single biggest losses to a society is a failure to educate its women properly – young women who do not receive an education can never achieve either their personal or economic potential, robbing both them and society of enormous gains. That is why the work of charities such as Education For All (who build dormitories near to secondary schools to enable girls to continue their education past the age of 12) is so important.

I am constantly struck by how many Moroccans choose to pursue their university studies in the UK and I am delighted that is the case. Mobility of university students not only broadens their education outlook, but it also increases inter-cultural understanding and breaks down stereotypes – I remember my ERASMUS year studying in Strasbourg as the best of my university life and where I made the closest of my friends.

The UK's Chevening programme, which operates in over 137 countries worldwide, has given bursaries to over 46,000 students to study in the UK. The programme gives future leaders the opportunity to develop personally and professionally and the Scholarships aim to support UK foreign policy priorities by creating lasting positive relationships with future leaders, influencers and decision makers around the world. We sent six Moroccans to the UK with Chevening Scholarships for academic year 2017/2018: it is not enough and I would like to considerably increase the number of Moroccans studying in the UK, both independently and through the Chevening Programme over the coming years.

The Times Higher Education World Rankings 2018, places three British universities in the top ten – with Oxford and Cambridge occupying the two top spots. The emphasis in British universities is on an open and stimulating environment where students are encouraged to ask questions, to challenge, to pursue independent thinking and to debate (an environment I try to emulate in the Embassy). But in addition to the excellence of the teaching environment, UK universities also offer the chance to learn and perfect the English language, which is increasingly the dominant international language for business and commerce.

The UK is renowned for its multicultural and multi-faith society and is home to many of the world's most internationally diverse campuses and communities. The UK is the world's second most popular study destination after the US, with its universities attracting more than 400,000 international students each year. The International Student Barometer gives the UK the highest international student experience satisfaction ratings for English-speaking countries.

One evening in 2003, I was sitting in a restaurant in London with my then girlfriend (now, happily my wife). She was telling me that her biggest regret was not studying medicine. We talked about what was preventing her from studying medicine. She quit her job the next day and went back to school. She studied every hour that she had and by the end of the year, she had the A-Levels necessary to get into medical school. My wife is now a top physio, working for the International Paralympic Committee.

Education is the key to unlocking human potential. Good education releases creativity, drives entrepreneurship, technology and innovation. It emancipates the poor and empowers the scientists, teachers, politicians and authors of tomorrow who will solve the great problems the world grapples with. Education is the basis for everything.

The centrality of education to the prosperity of a society is why education is my top priority here in Morocco and I look forward to working closely with my Moroccan partners to continue to improve the educational exchange between the UK and Morocco over the coming years.