

Charlemagne | Back to school

Some remedial lessons are needed for European leaders



T“TEACHERS, teachers, teachers.” Thus the headmistress of a school near Helsinki, giving her not-exactly-rocket-science explanation for why Finland has the best education system in the world. This week, as European Union heads of government gather for their usual pointless spring summit to lament their lack of progress with economic reform—the so-called Lisbon agenda—they might remember this Finnish mantra.

The Lisbon agenda proclaimed that the EU should aim to become the world’s “most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy by 2010”. Obviously, the words competitive and dynamic are hilariously inapt at such a sluggish time, when most of France seems to have taken to the streets to defend the notion that one’s first job should come with a lifetime guarantee. But the phrase “knowledge-based” is almost as incongruous.

Europe is failing its students. Seventeen of the top 20 universities in the world are American, according to Shanghai’s Jiao Tong university. Over a quarter of students studying outside their country of birth are in America. Moreover, the EU’s universities seem to be falling further behind—and not just behind America. Britain has almost doubled its graduate numbers since the 1960s, but that increase (which is rapid by EU standards) has been enough only to keep it in roughly the same position in the rankings of countries measured by graduates per head—in so far as numbers, rather than quality, can be a proxy for total educational output. Germany has increased its graduate population only slightly, and thereby plummeted from the middle of such rankings to near the bottom.

The fact is that global competition in higher education has become ferocious. South Korea has invested hugely in education and is now overtaking Europe in numbers of graduates (it has the third-highest number of graduates per head). China and India are producing more graduate engineers than the entire EU, which may be one reason why Microsoft has a huge research centre in Beijing (though it also has more than one in Europe).

The blunt fact is that most Europeans do not value degrees as highly as Asians or Americans appear to. In a new study for the Lisbon Council, a Brussels pressure-group, Andreas Schleicher offers some calculations that try to estimate what degrees are worth to university graduates. Everybody does well: on average, a student gets a 10% return on his (or more often his taxpayers’) investment.

But in America the average return is around 15%; in France and Italy it is only 8%.

Europe’s failings in higher education are familiar enough. More surprisingly, it is falling behind in secondary schools as well. The performance in mathematics of an average 15-year-old from a big European country is at or below the international average, according to the PISA study run by the OECD. Top of the list are Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan, plus a few small outward-looking EU members (including Finland).

Worse still, European schools do not provide the equality of educational opportunity that people seem to think they do. The PISA study also tries to assess how much student performance is affected by socio-economic background and how much by personal skills, by considering variations in mathematics results both within and between schools. The first variation presumably reflects student skill; the second, the socio-economic background of schools and students. If EU countries had equitable education systems, one might expect a lot of variation within schools, because pupils vary, but rather less between schools.

In fact, one finds precisely the opposite. The differences between schools are larger in most big EU countries than in the United States, for all its supposed canyon between hyper-achieving magnet schools and dismal sinkholes. Only a few small EU countries actually deliver an equitable education; and these are the ones that have junked the devices, such as stringent national curricula, or central direction from state or national bureaucracies, that are supposed to ensure equal education.

To the Finland Station

The explanation, argues Mr Schleicher, is that European education is stuck with an industrial mindset and has not adapted to the post-industrial world. Post-industrial organisations insist that innovation must come from anywhere; that hierarchies must be flat; and that everyone should be well educated. Manufacturing required a pyramid: lots of unskilled manual workers, some skilled ones, plus a few highly educated managers. The schools that meet this old demand—with early selection of students into academic and vocational streams, elite academic colleges and good vocational training—are still around, especially in Germany and central Europe. They are testimony to Europe’s resistance to change. (How many teachers does it take to change a lightbulb? What do you mean, *change?*)

Looking at France today, one might despair that change will ever come. Its government even blocked the publication of findings on French educational achievement and incomes (in a spirit of friendly co-operation, we have done some back-of-the-envelope calculations which suggest that standards in French schools are more closely related to incomes than in other countries). Yet in the 1960s, Finland had all these faults. Now, it has the best schools in the world. Finnish 15-year-olds have the highest level of mathematical skills, scientific knowledge and reading literacy of any rich industrialised country.

It has achieved all this by changing its entire system, delegating responsibility to teachers and giving them lots of support. There is no streaming and no selection; no magnet schools; no national curriculum; and few national exams. It is all, as that Finnish headmistress suggested, about getting good teachers—and then giving them freedom. If there is a lesson for EU leaders, it is: forget about multiple priority areas and action plans. European governments should go back to school. In Finland. ■