

**Presentation to OECD/CERI International Conference on  
Innovation, Governance and Reform in Education**

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**Delivery Version**

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**[IMAGE 1: Presentation by Lord Puttnam to OECD/CERI Conference on Innovation, Governance and Reform in Education]**

Good afternoon, it's a genuine pleasure to have been asked to speak to you today.

Every nation within the OECD is facing a future of increasing uncertainty.

I think we'd all agree that it's very hard to get a clear sense of how the 'map of any of our lives' is likely to shape up between now and 2020 - let alone beyond that.

**[IMAGE 2 – Embarking on a journey with no map]**

So if peering into the future doesn't offer much in the way of guidance, how much can we learn from the immediate past?

Well, exactly seventeen years have flashed by since I made the huge decision to leave the world of cinema – after thirty happy and, I hope, productive years - to engage full-time in the very different world of public policy – most particularly as it relates to education, the environment, and the challenges and potential of what we now term 'the creative industries'.

Today most of my long-distance travelling is confined to visiting countries in and around South-East Asia.

Which is as good a reason as any for starting out with the story of one particular young Vietnamese woman, and her struggle to make the most of her life.

Tay Thi's journey also underscores the ever-more important role education plays in that region - creating opportunities for young people in what's become an ever more competitive and complicated world.

Tay Thi was one of nine children born to a pretty impoverished farming family in the Mekong Delta.

**[IMAGE 3 – Map of Mekong Delta]**

She was bright and doing incredibly well at school until her mother insisted she start earning money for the family, as a housemaid in distant Ho Chi Minh City.

**[IMAGE 4 – Picture of Vietnamese girl]**

However Tay Thi persevered, and after getting through school started preparing secretly for a college entrance exam.

With no parental support, college seemed entirely unaffordable, but she'd scraped together every last cent, working in a factory job during her holidays, and at a Duck Soup restaurant each evening - often until 2.00am in the morning.

**[IMAGE 5 - Duck Soup Restaurant]**

Once at college she confined herself to a food budget of just fifteen dollars a month.

Badly under-nourished, she sometimes actually fainted in class.

**[IMAGE 6 – Fifteen US Dollars a month for food!]**

She shared a small room with two other young women, all sleeping on the floor next to each other.

She even set up a small reading light so that she wouldn't keep the others awake.

She still studies until midnight, then sets her alarm for 4.00am to get back to her books.

**[IMAGE 7 – Alarm clock and sound.]**

Her parents have at last come around to her ambition because they realise that she'll soon be an English Teacher - and by far the best paid member of her extended family.

Following graduation she is trying to arrange to teach in her own remote village school. "I'd like to change people's thinking", she says, "it's the best way of helping the children in my own community".

In one sense it's an astounding personal story, the type of which everyone here will have their own version, but Tay Thi represents just one of many, many young people I come across in South East Asia seeking to change their lives through the development of their education and their skills.

What we in the West are in danger of forgetting is that the thing most on this planet seek is a 'sense of stability'.

**[IMAGE 8 – Eastern and Western concepts of stability]**

And that for much of the West 'stability' has taken on an almost entirely economic meaning, whereas for the majority of the world's population 'stability' is largely determined by their ability to wake up each morning and provide their families with sufficient food and clean water to get through the day.

It's our failure on a daily basis to imagine and fully understand this paradox that leaves us necessarily humbled by the courage and determination of Tay Thi - and millions like her - whose sense of purpose is that much sharper than our own.

Yet it's that commitment to education, and the accumulated wisdom developing from it, that's likely to determine the successes and failures of the twenty-first century.

And this is every bit as true of nations as it is of individuals.

As we continue to work our way through the full ramifications of the 2008 economic crisis, I'd suggest it's also the type of wisdom that we'll find ourselves increasingly in need of.

Ever more demanding news cycles, economic and employment figures that are scrutinised every quarter - a world so 'interconnected' that a slip of the tongue, or an ill-thought through policy in one hemisphere, can wreak instant havoc in another.

This is a tough environment in which to make well-thought-through policy decisions - yet huge issues, like long-term youth unemployment demand that all of us dramatically 'raise our game'.

**[IMAGE 9 – EU Youth Unemployment 2012]**

In a sense many of the problems we face pit the present against the future; this generation against those as yet unborn - and that's just one of the reasons the young need to have a far greater voice, and take far greater responsibility for what will, after all, be their future.

**[IMAGE 10 – Cartoon “Hey, it’s my turn”]**

As The Financial Times suggested in early October, China will overtake the US as the world’s largest economy at some point before the end of this year.

That's enormously significant, as the US has been the dominant global market force for over 150 years!

We in the West have tended to see China's economic success as more of an economic 'prop' than a challenge to our supremacy - whereas the truth is the Chinese have 're-invented capitalism' - without being able to disentangle themselves from its inherent discontinuities, and the problems that will inevitably follow.

All this was summed up wonderfully well in a recent piece in the New York Times by columnist David Brooks, in reviewing a new book by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge entitled: "The Fourth Revolution."

**[IMAGE 11 – Cover of book]**

Here’s how he described it: "Democracies tend to have a tough time with long-range planning. Across the western world people are pretty disgusted with their governments. There is a widening gap between the pace of social and economic change, and the pace of government change” - or more importantly, I'd add, Governments response to change.

The advent of high-speed broadband has opened the door to a faster, richer, more interactive and more informative Internet experience than has ever previously been thought possible.

Within both education and business, the streaming of videos, plays, movies, animation, documentaries, concerts and so forth can now be seamlessly incorporated into our everyday day-to-day lives; be it in school, at work or at home.

Surely the advent of high-speed connectivity provides the opportunity, and to my mind justifies an entirely new 'Strategic Plan' for the integration of ICT and e-Learning across the whole spectrum of education.

#### **[IMAGE 12 - Country graph profile Sweden]**

But apart from stellar examples such as Sweden it's surely not unreasonable to suspect that we may be suffering from an 'institutionalised reluctance' - or is it simply resistance among a whole slew of stakeholders, in all countries and all parties, as well as a fair number of teachers and educationalists - to fully embrace and optimise the potential of digital innovation.

#### **[IMAGE 13 – EU Youth unemployment]**

Given the unconscionable levels of Youth Unemployment, particularly here in Europe, surely we can't accept any solution that simply suggests 'more of the same'?

One result of this overall lack of self-questioning, of innovation, of genuine enterprise, is the increasing disparity that's been allowed to open up between life in the lecture hall or classroom, and the daily experience of technology and the real world beyond the school and college gates.

To my mind, the roots of resistance to profound but necessary change run very, very deep.

But, strikingly, the evidence suggests it's not to do with any inbuilt reluctance among teachers to embrace change.

A recent report by the Gates Foundation on 'what teachers want from technology' noted that:

**[IMAGE 14 – Bill Gates]**

When asked to name the top three barriers preventing teachers from using digital instructional tools, less than 2 percent chose the response: “I do not see the value of using technology for student learning.”

The more common response was: “My students are going to be using this technology in their jobs, at home, and in their everyday lives.”

Despite the obvious truth of that, I continue to find it difficult to persuade policymakers that if we are to win back the trust of our students we have to get far better at understanding the challenges they face; we need to engage more effectively with their world, and learn to view technology, and the way in which they relate to it, through their eyes.

**[IMAGE 15 – Technology (written on blackboard)]**

And, unlike twenty five years ago when I first started making this argument, this most recent generation of teachers are themselves 'digital natives' - in many cases far more sophisticated than I am!

**[IMAGE 16 – Photograph of recent graduates]**

And as that Gates Foundation report makes clear, many of them fully understand, and really value, the power of 'technology'.

They've come to see it as 'transformative', not simply some kind of useful 'add-on', but as something that's already changed the nature of the way in which their students 'go about our daily lives'.

This in turn calls for the development of new and ever-more interesting forms of creativity, because digital technology isn't just a 'nice to have' - it really matters to our collective future;

to the prospects of this emerging generation securing the type of careers they increasingly want.

My own belief is that we can scarcely afford to imagine the social and geo-political repercussions of anything other than brilliantly equipped 21st Century lecture halls and classrooms, and an equally brilliant, well trained and committed generation to teach in them. To settle for anything less is, without doubt, to risk 'short-changing' an entire new generation.

After all, having in many cases raided their pensions, depleted their environment, and undermined their confidence in finding a worthwhile job, we cannot possibly allow them to drift into becoming 'second or even third-class' global citizens through our inability to invest in their future.

Should we fail to exercise sufficient imagination and self-sacrifice to offer them the same opportunities that every one of us enjoyed - and to a horrifying extent, squandered; that - to my mind - would border on criminality.

After all we're going to increasingly find ourselves relying on a generation of young people well versed in solving problems, tackling immense and complex challenges, and knowing how to communicate effectively with each other and the outside world.

They are also going to have to become ever-more 'resilient' if they're to succeed, most especially in the 'creative environments' represented in this room.

### **[IMAGE 17 - Resilience (strong arm muscle)]**

I certainly don't have to remind this audience that these are precisely the skills most relevant to today's society, and most valued by employers in just about every sector of the global economy.

And yet there is strong evidence that, in some countries, there is a continuing mismatch between what employers seek, and what the education system delivers.

And this surely, is where leadership committed to the reform and governance of educational institutions is sorely needed.

A few weeks ago, I read a typically illuminating piece in The New York Times by my favourite columnist, Tom Friedman.

**[IMAGE 18 - Tom Friedman NYT]**

He quoted the head of the Gallup Organisation's education division regarding work that polling organisation had recently carried out on the links between education and future success in the workplace.

Somewhat disturbingly, their poll showed that: “Ninety six percent of the college heads surveyed believed their schools were successfully preparing young people for the workplace; but when you ask recent graduates whether they felt fully prepared, only 14 percent say ‘yes’; and when you ask business leaders whether they believe they are getting enough college graduates with the skills they need, only 11 percent strongly agree! Surely what we have here is not just a 'skills gap', it is far more of an understanding gap.”

It's with challenges like this in mind, that I'd like to finish with a bit of ‘tough love’; by restating what I see as the crucial lessons we ought to have absorbed in our efforts to create a more 'successful' society - in an ever-more complicated world.

And when I use the term 'successful', I am not simply alluding to economic success.

Firstly, like it or not, 'getting education right' is more than simply one among a number of important priorities, insofar as the future of all OECD nations are concerned, it's far closer to being the 'whole ball of wax'.

Secondly, and this can never be repeated often enough; no education system can be better than the quality of the teachers it employs, and the ever-improving standards it's prepared to demand - and reward them for.

**[IMAGE 19 – “A country that fails to value its teachers....”]**

Thirdly, teacher training, at every level of education, has to be viewed as an entirely non-negotiable and continuing process, especially in this incredibly fast-moving digital age.

The commitment of Governments and educational leaders to the best possible quality of teacher training, along with regular, preferably annual, paid time-out for professional development, must be absolute - and that commitment, that 'compact' between Government and the world of education must, in every respect, be a two way affair.

And this challenge has to be supported by everyone in this room, no matter what their professional background - sheer self-interest demands that you actively engage in mentoring and developing 'talented young people'.

Fourthly, as I discovered during seven invaluable years as President of UNICEF, there needs to be an undisputed global acceptance of the importance of the education of women.

#### **[IMAGE 20 – Photos of girls in education]**

Educated women are the fulcrum around which can be built educated and healthy families – and those families will invariably be smaller, better cared for, and have a continuing engagement with education.

There is no magic - or spurious political or religious ideology in any of this - it's simply an established fact!

Next, where education is concerned, an absolute minimum of seven per cent of total GDP is the ambition any serious Government must somehow find the means to adhere to – all other areas of Public Expenditure, including Health, should be allocated in such a way as to make that figure as achievable, and as sustainable, as possible.

#### **[IMAGE 21 – OECD graph]**

At present few nations are achieving, let alone sustaining that figure.

As I've said, getting education systems right is, for most nations, 'the whole ball of wax' - and here's why.

**[IMAGE 22 – Education versus the other claims on expenditure]**

The principal business of all Governments is setting and maintaining spending priorities amid a complex and competing set of demands.

I've always argued that Education, like infrastructure, is far more of an investment than a 'cost'.

Why, because a world-class education system, and only a 'world-class' education system can, over time, deliver affordable world-class health-care and social services, as well as securing world-class pensions, along with the world-class infrastructure that supports and delivers them – among nations already competing for the best possible people the 'cut-price' option will never ever, ever be remotely viable!

Thank you very much for listening to me.

(2,676 words. 16 minutes).