# Ten reasons to be cheerful, part 9: Education [1]

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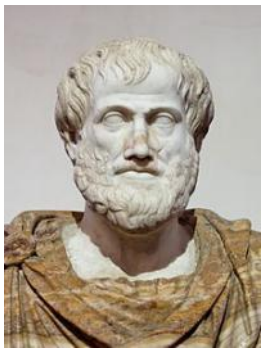

It is claimed in some circles that educational standards are falling, that it is being dumbed down, and that our successors will be less educated than ourselves. I disagree: I think education will be better.

**9. Education**

Education used to be only for an elite; now it is for the many. Across the world more and more children are being brought into education. Many of the world's top academic institutions are now found in the Far East, in countries that were recently poor. The education offered in such places is of a standard that leads on to research and eventually to Nobel prizes, while at a lower level children are in school instead of in the fields.

In the UK since 1950 we have seen higher education spread from covering one in twenty of the population to nearly one in two. Obviously the average standard is lower with more people given the opportunity, but the top 5% are no less well educated than were the previous top 5% when they alone had that chance.

Aristotle defined a university as a log with a teacher at one end and a student at the other, and it is true that almost everyone can benefit from education. It enhances and enriches life as well as opening doors to more of its opportunities. And this is not just for an elite.

One reason for my optimism that education will be better is that I think we are rapidly coming out of the notion that education should be about social engineering rather than about learning. When schooling was treated as a vehicle to promote equality, standards suffered. If universities are forced to take less able students to promote equality, standards will inevitably fall. I see many signs in the UK that people now want their children to receive a good education rather than one used to promote social equality.

Education is about striving and attainment, about being stretched and having one's talents and abilities developed to the full. When parents are given a choice, they choose schools which succeed in doing that, and part of my optimism comes from a belief that more of them will have that choice and will make it.

Another good portent, especially on the world scale, is the spread of computer-aided learning, including distant learning. This provides access by poor countries to some of the world's best teaching conducted over the internet. Even in developed countries, the development of machine intelligence could bring the ultimate one-for-one teacher-student ratio of Aristotle's log.

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