SHAPE

Education for a changing society

What is blocking real change in education?

Executive summary and recommendations

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The virtual SHAPE Education event held on 21 April 2021 aimed to address one key question: What is blocking real change in education?

An initial answer appeared to be the need to shift the collective mindset. However, this approach was deemed too broad to be actionable, and too idealistic to be practical. A greater focus was needed on three key points: what it really *means* to shift mindset; why conservatism in education persists when there are clearly so many eager minds and innovative approaches; and why, when we demonstrate such a strong will, we have yet to find a way.

Perhaps a more useful approach, and a helpful strategy to avoid change simply for change's sake, is to break down the abstract issues of conservatism and mindset into things that can be tackled practically. From this starting point, a closer analysis of the key themes revealed six broad apparent blockers to meaningful change in education:

Blockers to change

1. A lack of agreement about the purpose of education and therefore what needs to change.

2. Accountability, responsibility and agency – whose job is it to enact change?

3. A false dichotomy between school and 'real life'.

4. Dissonance between what people think society needs and what people want for their own children.

5. The inherent unpredictability of the future and how to respond to this.

6. The mistake of equating technology with innovation.

Each of these points relates in some way to the difficulty of bringing about fundamental changes in mindset.
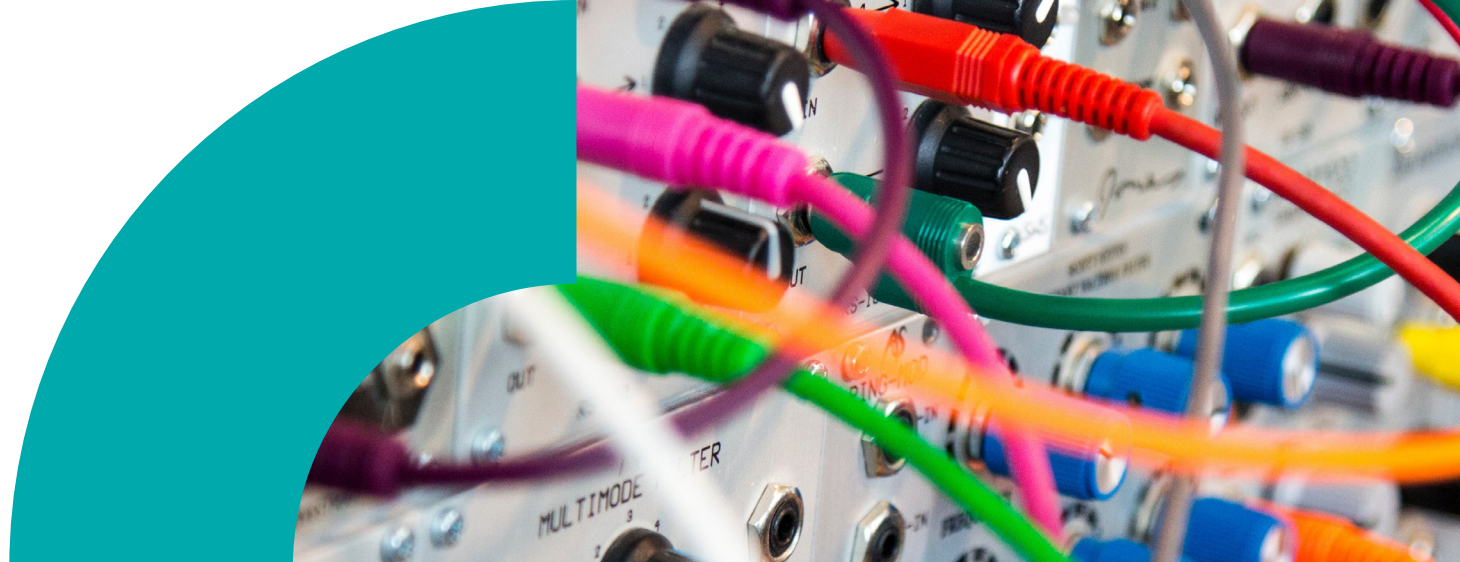
Recommendations

Identifying major blockers to meaningful educational change is just the first step. This learning then needs to be put into practice. Fortunately, there is considerable overlap between the issues outlined here; in some cases, a single powerful recommendation may help address multiple blockers. The list below is grouped into several key areas of focus, and numbers 1–6 indicate those recommendations that relate to one or more of the specific blockers identified in this report.

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Embrace complexity

1. Avoid the trap of looking for one big solution.

Education, let alone making changes to long-held educational practice, is extremely complex. The most effective methods and resources vary by context and by individual. Consider that many small behaviours or changes, apparently insignificant on their own, can have huge cumulative effects over time. Perhaps the best way to bring about meaningful change in education is for every individual to do their part to tackle small elements of the system that are within their sphere of influence.

Blocker   2

2. Plan flexibly for the future.

Do not try to predict or to plan one utopian vision of the future of education – there are too many unknown and unknowable factors. Instead, consider multiple alternative scenarios and work iteratively so that goals and methods can be adapted, if necessary, to meet new needs as they arise.

Blockers   4,   5

Rethink the curriculum and syllabus

3. **Think systemically.**

Look at all parts of the education system, all players within that system, and how those parts and players interact with other systems. Instead of asking: 'Why don't these learners fit in this system?', consider asking 'Why don't our systems fit these learners?'

Blockers 1, 2, 4, 5

4. **Focus on both content knowledge and skills.**

In particular, do not overlook the importance of intra-personal awareness and interpersonal relationships in education. As some commentators argued, we have a real responsibility to enable young people to learn to live with themselves. Every person in the world benefits from having skills and strategies for communicating effectively with others and with oneself. The best way to deal with an ever-changing world is to be prepared to adapt one's practices and attitudes throughout life.

Blockers 3, 5

5. **Do not treat 'school' or 'learning' as separate from real life.**

Ensure that what happens in class is relevant to learners' lives outside class. This means not focusing only on content knowledge, but also including the development of socio-emotional and interpersonal skills as funda-mental throughout all years and contexts of learning.

Blockers 3, 6

Instead of asking: 'Why don't these learners fit in this system?', consider asking 'Why don't our systems fit these learners?'

Include diverse voices in the conversation

6. **Include those participating in learning experiences every day in research and discussions on education.**

   For example, research conducted by teachers and learners themselves could contribute key insights to wider decision-making processes. Ensure these teachers and learners have adequate time, funding and support to undertake such valuable work.

   Blockers   2,   6

7. **Harness the power of collaboration.**

   In particular, foreground the importance of including young people themselves in discussions and decisions about their future. Events could feature speakers and participants from an even wider range of ages and backgrounds.

   Blocker   2

8. **Help young people to contribute their perspectives.**

   When including young people in discussions about how formal education can prepare them for their future lives, ensure suitable support or scaffolding is available so they have the requisite skills and tools to express their thoughts on the matter.

   Blockers   2

9. **Empower people at all levels, and on a local scale.**

   This may facilitate a consensus on what they are trying to achieve in their context and how best to do this. Giving more people a voice and a real practical influence will enable each individual to bring about change and be more likely to feel a sense of ownership in the process, which may also lead to more effective systems of accountability.

   Blockers   1,   2,   4

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Provide support, funding and training

10. **Provide more time and funding for teacher and learner training.**

Appropriate training in using digital devices effectively will help ensure that they complement (rather than replace) non-digital tools and methods. Help teachers and learners transfer their skills in using technology outside class to using technology *for learning*. Avoid simply supplying tech and hoping the user will know what to do with it.

Blockers 3, 6

11. **Ensure support and training for teachers are provided continuously/frequently.**

Otherwise, people will be less likely to follow up in their everyday practice what they learned during a training session.

Blockers 2, 6

12. **Facilitate 'low-stakes' or 'no-stakes' opportunities for teachers and learners to try new things.**

Remove the fear of experimentation or innovation by removing the risk of failure or negative judgement (e.g. in inspections or evaluations), at least temporarily. Ensure teachers have some freedom to deviate from everyday practices and to reflect on the difference this makes. This might range from smaller teacher- and learner-led changes, to trialling new learning products or exploring a new approach, such as experiential learning.

Blockers 2, 6

Finally, remember that real change takes time and co-operation from all involved.

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About SHAPE

We are facing unprecedented challenges in society and the world of work which demand changes in the design and delivery of education. It is vital we ensure that education continues to meet the needs of young people, preparing them for the world they will face on leaving school. An education system designed for an industrial economy, now being automated, requires transformation from a system based on facts and knowledge to one that actively applies that knowledge in ways that develop human potential. However, many working to implement new education tools and models are working piecemeal in silos with solution-focused approaches that do not adequately address underlying pain points or connect with a clear vision.

SHAPE Education, an initiative from Cambridge Assessment together with Cambridge Judge Business School, seeks to connect complex real-world problems of education with creative educational ideas and research to build the next generation of educational solutions and thought leadership for the good of global education.

Cambridge Assessment

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Judge Business School

Read the full report
https://camengli.sh/3vqTBl5

Watch the recordings from the April 2021 SHAPE Education event

Find out more

shape-education.org

linkedin.com/showcase/shape-education-events

cambridgeassessment.org.uk/blogs/
principles-for-the-future-of-education