

Exaggeration, exaggeration, exaggeration: Parties over-egg claims on education

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The report, led by Professor Anthony Heath from The University of Manchester, says governments mostly fail to introduce policies which can be rigorously evaluated.

The report, published this month in the *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, praises Labour 's policy on further [education](#) and Education Maintenance Allowance.

The Blair and Brown administrations he says, also presided over narrowing inequalities of [educational achievement](#) for secondary school students.

And it accepts that New Labour acted on its promises to prioritize education: education spending as a percentage of GDP, grew from 4.5% in 1996/7 to 6.2 per cent in 2010/11.

However, the report draws no firm conclusion on the key areas of educational standards and university tuition fees.

And it is also unclear, it adds, if the narrowing inequalities were down to autonomous developments in society, the continuation of previous education policies not reversed by Labour, or new initiatives.

Only a 2008 evaluation of the 'literacy hour' and a 2004 evaluation of EMAs, which convincingly show positive results, were robust, it says.

The reports co-authors include Dr Alice Sullivan from Institute of Education, University of London, Dr Vikki Boliver, Durham University and Dr Anna Zimdars, King's College London.

Professor Heath, Professor of Sociology at the Institute for Social Change in the School of Social Sciences, received a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours list this month.

He said: "New Labour has claimed that its 13 years in power have boosted standards, which is hotly challenged by the Conservatives.

"But the biggest story is how both sides over-claim about their respective successes and failures and the poor quality and lack of decent statistical data.

"But it does seem that on balance, there was little change over time in British levels of educational attainment relative to those in other countries

"We would not rule out, however, the possibility that absolute standards did rise modestly."

He added: "Despite the resources devoted to policy evaluations by the New Labour government, which declared a belief in 'evidence-driven policy', much of evidence is disappointingly uninformative

"The problem with official evaluations is that they range from researchers drawing appropriately tentative conclusions in the face of difficult methodological issues, to essentially puff-pieces for government policies.

"The changes in the definitions, and the incentives for schools to play the system, mean that little confidence can be placed on official

pronouncements about the magnitude of any increase in standards.

"We are also inclined to be skeptical about the effectiveness of measures continued from previous Conservative governments such as testing, league tables, and parental choice.

"There is no independent evidence that these have done anything to drive up standards."

Provided by University of Manchester

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