



CHOOSING TO LEARN

IMPROVING PARTICIPATION
AFTER COMPULSORY EDUCATION

SIMONE DELORENZI AND PETER ROBINSON

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Executive summary

The government has made increasing participation in post-16 education and training a high priority. Yet it is doubtful whether it will be able to reach the very ambitious targets it has set for itself. A plethora of top-down initiatives launched since the early 1990s have had almost no impact on participation rates, which have remained relatively constant for more than a decade. A change of approach is now required to tackle this problem.

Improving participation post-16

Low rates of participation in education and training post-16 are generally recognised as one of the significant weaknesses of England's learning system. Those who leave education at 16 or 17 without good qualifications see their long-term chances of finding rewarding employment considerably reduced. Because they tend to come disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds, early leavers are a striking reminder of persistent inequalities in our learning system.

Policies targeted at early years and compulsory schooling are crucial for improving participation later on. But they will not remove the need for a strong and equitable post-16 learning system. That system needs to be relatively flexible to reflect the reality of the relatively flexible labour market in the UK, for example by recognising the extent of part-time learning. Participation in education and training amongst school leavers who do not follow standard routes into higher education is more complex, with lengthier transitions into the adult labour market, than is the case in most European systems.

Participation and transitions

This government has concentrated on trying to reduce the numbers of those most excluded - those not in education, employment or training - and, more recently, those in jobs without training. Specific policies are required to address the underlying problems of the small proportion of young people who stay out of any socially accepted activity for a long period of time.

However, a real increase in staying-on rates can only be triggered by a much wider approach, encompassing all those with modest or poor GCSE results at 16. These young people - nearly half the whole cohort - do not see their learning needs adequately met by existing post-16 provision. Their courses receive less funding and imply fewer taught hours than for higher

achieving students. Their programmes are often badly designed. Ultimately, these factors have an impact on the quality of their learning experience, on what they gain out of it and on the value of their qualifications in the labour market.

The quality of the learning experience should be at the heart of any policy to improve participation. This is not only because it can increase motivation for young people to stay on, but also because participation is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Policy needs to be geared, not just to keeping young people in learning, but enabling them to acquire the skills and qualifications that will allow them to get on in life and work.

Curriculum and qualifications reform

For more than ten years, successive governments have been trying to impose 'parity of esteem' between vocational and academic qualifications through a top-down approach based on designing and imposing new qualifications. Even when employers have been involved, this has failed both to increase participation and to give vocational qualifications more value in the labour market.

The Increased Flexibility Programme has been one means by which vocational GCSEs and other vocational qualifications have been offered to 14-16 year olds. However, the current evaluation of the programme cannot answer the question as to whether it has significantly increased participation rates post-16.

Vocational learning should not be seen as the only provision for lower attainers and the disengaged. Low completion rates on the work-based learning route and, to a lesser extent, the full-time vocational route show the limits of using them as a way of remotivating young people. Vocational courses that are provided in a classroom setting by teachers without the necessary business or industrial experience might fail to provide the alternative curriculum that some young people are looking for.

Years of promoting apprenticeships in non-traditional sectors have yielded disappointing results, whether in the number of work placements available or in their quality. They are often used as a form of subsidy for employers, without significant gains for the apprentices themselves. Where this is the case, the resources involved would be better spent if redirected towards high quality programmes in colleges. Apprenticeships should continue to be promoted in the sectors and with employers where they provide genuine possibilities for acquiring specialised knowledge and skills on the job.

Institutions and funding

In most areas of the country, there is a selection process taking place at 16, whereby students are sent to different institutions, depending on their pre-

vious levels of attainment. Further education colleges take the near totality of lower attainers in their areas working towards qualifications at level 2 and below. Therefore, improving participation means targeting more resources at colleges and at lower level programmes.

The collaborative arrangements that have been put in place among schools and colleges cannot counteract the overall competitive environment in which they have to operate. If competition is to remain the leading logic behind government policy, there is, at a minimum, a need to create a level playing field between all providers. Reducing the funding gap between schools and colleges should be a priority in order to make sure that learners receive the same level of funding, whatever their levels of prior attainment.

Incentives and support for learners

Policies intended to provide more incentives and support for young people in order to encourage them to stay in or go back into education and training have had some partial success, but may now have reached the limit of their effectiveness. Joined-up careers and general advice services, in the form of Connexions, are being re-vamped. A direct impact on participation rates has proved elusive, although evidence is contradictory and the experience too short to be conclusive.

Financial incentives through the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) have been more successful at increasing participation, but to a lesser extent than hoped for after the pilots. Moreover, they do not seem to have had any measurable impact on the attainment of qualifications.

Incentives and support remain important policy instruments. But they can only work in a system which offers an attractive and high quality learning experience, backed up by adequate funding and regulation mechanisms.

Key recommendations

Greater autonomy for teachers and institutions

Recognise that the current approach has failed

- A decade of top-down curriculum development has failed to raise participation rates and has made the learning system even more complex. The specialised diplomas outlined in the 14-19 White Paper seem likely to repeat the pattern. The starting point for policy must be to recognise that this model has not worked.

More space for professional innovation

- Teachers, schools and colleges should be given more opportunity to develop and adapt provision for their learners. It is time to give those at

the front line the professional space to innovate, but this will require significant changes to the way post-16 learning is organised, funded and regulated.

Bottom-up curriculum development

- Greater freedom to innovate would make room for bottom-up curriculum development, which should seek alternative ways of teaching general and vocational subjects, where appropriate. These alternatives could take a number of forms: from devising new ways of teaching and learning, to the development of integrated curriculum provision.

Integrated curriculum provision

- Teachers and lecturers should be encouraged to develop curriculum provision integrated around common themes. These could be either general, vocational, or a mixture of both. Coherent programmes should be designed so that course elements support and reinforce each other. They would be devised by small, multi-disciplinary teams, able to adapt provision to their specific group of students. This would be facilitated by continuous teacher assessment. But they should lead to qualifications that are nationally recognised and allow progression.
- This type of provision should be trialled through a pilot to encourage groups of teachers (and, where relevant, lecturers) already involved in the 14-19 Pathfinders to create integrated programmes. It could be piloted in post-16 settings in a first phase. Longer-term, schools should offer it to all their students from the start of secondary school.

A general alternative alongside vocational provision

- A general alternative, not only a vocational one, should be offered to all young people at levels 1-3. General options taught in a more applied way might prove as attractive as 'weakly' vocational courses and would have the advantage of not forcing young people into early career choices if they do not feel ready for them.

An example of general integrated provision

- Innovative college programmes already offer promising examples of general integrated provision. For example, Lewisham College has developed an alternative to A-levels as a pathway to higher education, the Youth Entry to Higher Education programme. It was designed for those with no or low GCSE attainment, but also attracts young people already at level 2.
- The Youth Entry to Higher Education programme runs over two years full-time and is available in two areas, both composed of traditional subject titles: humanities/social sciences (history, law, sociology, psy-

chology, politics, economics, citizenship, European studies and English) and science (physics, chemistry, biology, general science and environmental science).

- Youth Entry to Higher Education is designed as a single integrated programme where students learn the subject knowledge associated with their discipline, research/study skills and generic skills in communications, IT and maths. Some cross-cutting themes provide a context for the different subjects (for example, the history of crime and punishment, or biological, chemical and physical forensic science).

Reviewing the qualifications development process

- The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has been given a prominent role in developing the new specialised diplomas, alongside employer sector bodies. This approach has already proved unsuccessful in the past. The QCA should not be asked to get involved in the detailed development of qualifications and should restrict its role to that of a regulatory body. Awarding bodies are responsible for developing qualifications. The role of the QCA should be to set broad criteria for qualifications development at different levels and, as now, to accredit qualifications proposed by awarding bodies that match these criteria.
- Adapting provision and qualifications to local needs may be more important, and more relevant for local employers, than their assumed nation-wide validity. Institutions or groups of institutions should be given more autonomy to design their own qualifications. A procedure should be set up whereby they could be nationally validated: awarding bodies could play this role, under the supervision of the QCA.

Increased adaptability through the credit framework

- The proposed credit framework, 'Framework for Achievement' should make this type of flexible and adaptive provision easier, by allowing for qualifications to be built up through combining units. It would also allow the recognition of small steps of achievement and prove more motivating for learners.

Developing provision below level 2

- All the government targets focus on level 2. But this encompasses very different types of qualifications. Some level 2 vocational qualifications carry no premium in the labour market, while some level 1 qualifications tend to secure better wages and employment prospects. Qualifications at entry level and level 1 can also offer a useful stepping stone for those who need to learn more progressively or at a lower pace. Provision at these levels is currently patchy and should be further developed.

A four-year learning entitlement

An entitlement to four years of learning up to 25 and up to level 3

- 16 year olds already effectively have a four-year learning entitlement up to level 3. We should formalise this and as resources allow extend it for those who experience breaks in learning during their teens, but who may come back to learning later. The current cut-off at 19 should be phased out and provision for all learners funded for any four years of full-time equivalent study, initially between 16 and 21 and eventually up to 25. At this point free access to courses would be guaranteed up to level 3. This would be the one significant additional cost: providing free tuition at level 3 to young adults alongside the free tuition at level 2 now in principle available to everyone. The scale of any extra costs would depend on take-up.

A credit framework consistent across age groups

- The credit framework should also span the pre- and post-19 phases in order to allow learners to build on their achievements throughout their post-16 learning.

Parity of funding for institutions

- The new learning entitlement should be backed by parity of funding pre- and post-19 and across institutions. The existing funding gap between learners in schools and colleges needs to be filled, following the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) guidelines, by 2008.

Parity of funding for learners

- A system needs to be set up whereby providers are given incentives to devote as much time and resources to the lower attainers as to A-level students. Funding should follow the learner, rather than the qualification, i.e. it should be given to institutions according to the number of full-time learners, whatever the qualifications they are pursuing. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) proposal of a funding regime based on 'standard learner numbers' should be a major step in this direction. A common funding method reflecting this needs to be applied across all post-16 institutions, including school sixth forms.

Extending the EMA

- In line with the new entitlement, the EMA should be extended to four years, up to the age of 25, by merging with the Adult Learning Grant (ALG). Students can already get the EMA for up to two years and the ALG for up to three years. The revised EMA should also be made more flexible, by allowing for a mix of recognised activities to give access to the EMA, in addition to the currently proposed 'Activity Allowance'.

- Plans to devise a single youth allowance should be taken forward in order to ensure easier and less stigmatising access to support. Any form of financial incentive and support needs to be backed up by an efficient information and advice system.

Local learning systems

Strategic role for the commissioner of learning

- The role for the commissioner of learning, the local authority and/or the local LSC, should be to make sure that provision is available that is suitable to all learners, to fill gaps and to stimulate the providers, where necessary, for example to develop new general alternatives taught in a more applied way.
- The commissioning body should also be given a strategic coordinating role that could lead to the creation of local learning systems. At each local level there would be an agreed local learning plan, within which all providers of learning (outside higher education) to 14-25 year olds would operate, taking collective responsibility for the achievement and retention of all young people within an area.
- The strategic coordinating role needs to be provided by a stronger body than the current local authorities or local LSCs. Only local authorities have the necessary democratic legitimacy to perform this task. In the short term, the commissioning and coordination activities undertaken by local authorities and the local LSCs should be increasingly aligned. But by 2015, local authorities should be playing the lead commissioning role for all services for young people up to the age of 25, subsuming the Local Partnership Teams currently being proposed by the LSC. The role of local authorities in commissioning in London and other major conurbations will need to be settled through the wider governance arrangements pertaining to regional government and 'City-regions' currently under government review.

A level playing field for colleges and school sixth forms

- Plans should be made to avoid the creation of more segregation between school sixth forms and colleges, or having to sustain uneconomic sixth forms. The presumption in favour of the creation of new school sixth forms should be reversed, unless schools can show convincingly how they would make more effective provision for those with lower levels of attainment at 16. New school sixth forms should not be allowed to make the 'bog-standard' curriculum offer of A-levels and 'weakly' vocational provision, but should be required to innovate, for example with general options taught in a more applied way.
- Colleges should be given more autonomy to determine how best to meet their role, within the agreed pattern of local provision. LSC pro-

posals to fund a plan agreed with institutions should provide more stability to colleges. But this also needs to be backed by the LSC's commissioned element being a minimal proportion of the funding allocation - maximum 5% - in relation to the core.

Children's trusts - resources and responsibilities

- Children's trusts could be a positive move towards devolving more power back to elected local authorities and allowing them to shape provision that is adapted to the specific communities that they serve. This move needs to be backed by a real transfer of responsibilities and resources to local authorities in order to ensure that they have the capacity to fulfil their role.

Independent advice and guidance

- The provision of good quality and independent advice and guidance needs to be secured by setting up strict criteria. Schools and colleges should only be allowed to opt out of provision commissioned by children's trusts in specific circumstances and following a rigorous procedure. Arrangements need to be underpinned by an acknowledgement that those most at risk should receive more support.

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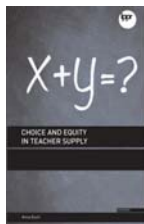


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