

REPORT

MOVING ON UP

DEVELOPING A STRONG,
COHERENT UPPER SECONDARY
EDUCATION SYSTEM IN ENGLAND

Louise Evans

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SUMMARY

Too many young people are still failing to gain the qualifications, skills and wider experience they need to make the transition into a prosperous, fulfilling adulthood. One policy solution has been to increase the age of participation, meaning that, from September this year, young people will be required to stay in education or training until 18. The difficulty is that the current overarching system – which is the cumulative result of deliberate policy change as well as evolution and mere accident – seems to lack a clear, shared vision of what this new, extended English upper-secondary education system should offer.¹

We are left with a scenario where post-16 education still often feels like an add-on, and this feeling is exacerbated by inconsistent funding, a fragmented institutional landscape and narrow expectations of curricula. Nevertheless, as the participation age is set to change, there is an opportunity to systemically reframe our upper-secondary education system.

This report aims to be ambitious but realistic about what that could look like. It tries to provide but distinguish between four elements, which are crucial for any reform to be a success:

1. **Definition:** a clear sense of what we mean by ‘upper-secondary education’, before we attempt to set a vision or recommend policy change.
2. **Vision and overarching framework:** a consensus about the importance, purpose and form of upper-secondary education in England, so that any system change can flow from and be guided by this shared vision.
3. **Ambition:** a sense of where we might like the system to end up if it really is to deliver on the vision, while accepting that this may be a long-term endpoint to work towards.
4. **Practical action plan:** the policy and changes that could be implemented in the short term as stepping stones towards the vision and ambition.

The report makes the case for a well-defined upper-secondary system in England, which will ensure a broad, stretching programme of study for all students over a four-year period. This needs to be underpinned by:

- a clear vision and agreement on an overarching curriculum
- a more open transition at the beginning of the phase
- an accountability system which encourages responsibility for a learner across the whole period
- clearer local oversight to be able to deliver the vision
- fairer funding across the phase.

The report makes a series of recommendations to achieve these aims.

¹ The focus of this report is solely on education in England, as responsibilities in this area are devolved to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Definition

Critically, we first need a clear definition of what we mean by upper-secondary education.

As chapter 4 shows, there have been many different labels and definitions used to describe education for the teenage age-group over recent years. This proliferation of terminology is indicative of the fact that England's educational landscape is messy and fragmented: we do not have a strong, coherent upper-secondary system. Before moving on to vision and policy, we therefore set out a clear definition of upper-secondary education in England. Clarity, consistency and consensus on this language will surely aid progress.

Politicians, policymakers, educators and all others should therefore agree² that an upper-secondary phase in England means:

'...the educational experience of a young person which starts at the beginning of Year 10 and typically lasts four years until the end of the academic year in which they turn 18. This is the period through which all young people will be expected to complete a broad, stretching and coherent programme of study, building up a collection of knowledge, skills and experience to allow them to move into a prosperous, flexible and rewarding adulthood.'

In addition, for a proportion of young people a fifth year may be needed to complete this stretching programme before they are ready to make the transition to higher education, training or work. In those scenarios, it is right that this flexibility should be maintained in the system to ensure it is inclusive, subject to them continuing to work towards achieving the broad programme of study described above.

Government should commit quickly to this definition of upper-secondary education, using it consistently to drive coherence in policymaking.

Vision

Next, there must be **a shared, driving vision of the purpose of upper-secondary education in England capable of guiding the system and bringing breadth, stretch and coherence to young people's experiences.**

We propose that this visionary statement should be:³

'We want the English upper-secondary education system to ensure that every young person is equipped with the knowledge, skills and capabilities to participate fully in society, whether at work or in further and higher education, and in the wider civic life of the community. This means that in their four years of upper-secondary education every young person should be given the opportunity to develop:

- a core of subject knowledge, understanding and learning skills attained through coherent programmes of study
- good levels of literacy and numeracy, at a minimum equivalent to GCSE grade C, but with many going further as they pursue these subjects throughout their whole upper-secondary education
- the cultural resources and capabilities to approach adulthood with independence, confidence and creativity
- an understanding of democratic and social citizenship that will enable them to benefit from and contribute to wider society.'

2 Or, if this particular definition cannot be agreed on, they should commit to a debate and quick agreement on an alternative.

3 See chapter 4 for further discussion.

We believe this vision is strong, relevant and could be the basis for consensus. It guides the recommendations that are made in the rest of this report. Debating the vision behind upper-secondary education is not something that happens widely or readily at the moment. If this report stimulates this vision statement being discussed, finessed and ultimately adopted and applied to policy, then that will be a success.

Learning and experience

Next, we need to tackle **how this vision translates into what young people should be learning and experiencing during this phase of education.**

Currently, the English curriculum sees young people undertaking much narrower programmes of study than their peers in most other national upper-secondary systems, including many of the most successful. We need a universal expectation of what a young person will study and achieve through their four or five years of upper-secondary education, in order to live up to the broad and demanding yet vital vision set out above.

In short, we believe that **all young people should be expected to leave upper-secondary education having achieved much broader and more demanding programmes of study than they do currently.** This includes:⁴

- having demonstrated core learning and achieved qualifications of both breadth and depth
- with the literacy and numeracy skills required to succeed in adult life (and with many stretching themselves in this respect beyond what has been expected previously)
- having demonstrated their ability to critically and independently approach and tackle complex problems, through the requirement to complete an extended project
- with a portfolio of experience that shows their personal development and contribution to the community.

Of course, some young people already leave upper-secondary education with these skills and experiences in hand. Alison Wolf's proposal to move towards funding study programmes rather than qualifications in the post-16 phase was also a push in the right direction. It is also the case that some young people are being rewarded for similar achievements, for instance through the government's technical baccalaureate. But, critically, we want to expand this expectation so that it is universal and provides the focus for the whole four-year period. This approach would replace the current model characterised by a national curriculum to the age of 16 but variegated expectations beyond that point. It is about not only setting a minimum universal expectation, but allowing those at the top to continue to be challenged to broaden their programme and experience throughout the four years.

Debating and cementing in place the foundation stones of a universal, broad upper-secondary programme of study is the first necessary step. It also requires us to consider how the rest of the system can work for rather than against this kind of coherent four-year programme. Chapter 6 explores how we can ensure that this breadth can apply to all learners, including those who rightly may wish to follow a predominantly work-based learning route at this age. Chapter 8 explores how a more universal four-year programme of study could be supported by the accountability system. And chapter 10 explores how funding across the system should be reviewed to allow for and support breadth and stretch throughout the whole of the upper-secondary period.

4 See chapter 5 for more detail.

Rather than calling for the immediate implementation of a national baccalaureate or other form of leaving certificate, this report looks at the shape of these initial foundation stones. It may be that a truly universal, broader offer can only be fully achieved once this kind of overarching structure is in place – chapter 5 looks at the conversations that are starting to begin about what this might look like. Nonetheless, we have not made this our starting point, for two important reasons. First, history shows us that starting out with radical qualification reform and implementation is expensive, time-consuming and difficult. Second, we first need to effect a change of mindset and to establish a more enabling system, within which an overarching approach might be allowed to develop rather than being imposed.

Vocational education

Next, we **must look at the role of vocational education in the upper-secondary phase.**

The government has certainly not been silent in this area – the Wolf review has led to a number of changes. A significant process of revalidation has identified those vocational qualifications that are sufficiently rigorous and relevant to be counted in key stage performance tables, and only two such subjects are allowed to count in the 'five A*–C grades' measure. Post-16, institutions are now funded for study programmes rather than individual qualifications. For vocational education at level 3, new tech levels have been developed, which are only approved for inclusion in performance tables when they have the endorsement of a sector body or five employers. The technical baccalaureate has been introduced to recognise those students who, alongside a tech level, gain level 3 core maths and complete an extended project qualification. Our contention is that all students, not just those on the 'tech bacc' route, should be aiming for similarly broad and stretching achievement.

On apprenticeships, there should be a critical distinction made between those who are undertaking work-based learning pre-19, those aged 19–24 and those over 25. We recommend that apprenticeships should *normally* be restricted to those aged under 25 and should predominantly exist at level 3 or above.

However, there remains a place for a predominantly work-based learning route in the upper-secondary phase. There will still be those who use their upper-secondary education to embark on a level 3 apprenticeship with a view to moving into a higher apprenticeship or study at 19, and those who use work-based learning at level 2 to progress into a higher-level apprenticeship or further study later on.

It is critical, however, that **any young person studying vocational education, whether primarily in a college or work-based setting, should still be expected to complete the other elements of a broad upper-secondary programme of study.** Those countries that have strong apprenticeships as part of their upper-secondary system, such as Switzerland and the Netherlands, nonetheless continue to insist that all young people acquire a core of general education – we must do the same.

There should also be only one overarching curriculum or standard for those on a vocational path during their upper-secondary education, whether primarily college or work-based. Currently, there are two sets of standards and methods for developing these standards, for those on a vocational route at 16–19, depending on whether they are following an apprenticeship or studying vocational courses in college or school.⁵ The Trailblazers process sets the standards for apprenticeships, and these standards apply whether the learner is on an apprenticeship at 16 or 60 years of age. For level 3 tech levels, which are the qualifications being acquired

⁵ There has also been the process of developing 'tech awards', which are the vocational qualifications for 14–16-year-olds, but at this age there is not a parallel 'work-based standard' as there is for 16–19-year-olds.

by those in a predominantly school- or college-based setting, there is a separate development process, which involves acquiring employer engagement and sign-off through a different method. There should just be one set of vocational standards for those of upper-secondary age, whether acquired in a predominantly work- or education-based setting. Chapter 6 explores how a single process might be developed that would both provide a coherent set of technical standards for this age-group and engage employers consistently with the upper-secondary curriculum.

Having a single set of standards should also lead to the adoption of a more flexible yet coherent vocational route, as per the Dutch model. There, young people on a primarily work-based route would spend at least one or two days a week in college, focussing on off-the-job training and the broader elements of their programme of study. On the other hand, a primarily college-based student would be expected to spend at least one day a week in a workplace, applying their training and potentially developing their extended project through real-life experience. Crucially, all young people studying vocational education at upper-secondary level would be expected to achieve the same core standard and complete the same wider study programme, whether they are learning primarily in a workplace or in college.

The transition into upper-secondary education

Next, it is necessary to explore how the transition into the upper-secondary phase might be made more flexible, in terms of institutional choice.

The number of young people who move institutions to undertake their upper-secondary phase is still limited. There are only 14 colleges that take young people full-time from the age of 14 (which equates to just 2,000 full-time students) and there are currently 66 university technical colleges and studio schools which cater specifically for the upper-secondary age range. IPPR will be undertaking a further in-depth study in 2015 into the impact of university technical colleges on local areas, and so this report does not seek to preempt its outcomes. Anecdotally, however, it does appear that schools are often reluctant to let young people leave and pick up their education again somewhere else at the beginning of Year 10.

It is important that young people and their parents should be given an active choice and information about making a transition at the beginning of the upper-secondary phase. In summary, we recommend that:

1. During Year 9, schools should be required to give students and their parents structured ‘progression’ advice about the expectations of the upper-secondary programme, explaining the pathways and choices that might be open to them over the next four years. Schools should be required to be open about the option to change institution.
2. Schools should also be required to give other institutions a means of explaining their alternative offer to students. We propose that where a school falls within another institution’s catchment area then that institution should have access to the school’s Year 9 students. If more than five institutions qualify in this way, then access should be limited to the nearest five institutions so that schools and their young people are not overwhelmed with additional information or an unwieldy number of choices.
3. In the final term of Year 9, students should be given the explicit choice to confirm that they wish to remain in their current school or to ‘opt out’ and apply for a place at another institution.

Our expectation is that many young people will choose to stay where they are. Nonetheless, if new upper-secondary institutions are going to be given a chance to succeed, and there is going to be an increased sense of upper-secondary as a distinct, coherent phase in an individual’s education, then it is important that Year

10 is seen as a more open transition point. To advance this, chapter 9 explores the potential for local oversight of upper-secondary education, so that where an education commissioner is in place they may be given the power to make a decision about whether and how the second and third requirements work best in their area.

Shifting the focus of accountability

The accountability system needs to be reoriented to ensure greater focus on achievement at the end of upper-secondary phase, rather than on achievement at age 16, as is the main focus currently. We need an accountability system that is no longer fixated on getting young people over an arbitrary C/D grade threshold at one moment in time. Instead, 16 should be more of a 'progress checkpoint' to gauge how young people are getting on midway through their upper-secondary education.

The fact that the floor standard at key stage 4 will focus on progress across a broad range of subjects in the future is a positive step. We also support the retention of two other headline measures designed to consistently give parents and students additional, upfront information about performance – that is:

- **the average attainment of young people over the same subjects as the progress measure is based on⁶**
- **the percentage of young people who have achieved a C grade in level 2 English and mathematics** – these are vital basics that should usually be covered off early in the upper-secondary phase to enable further progress in later years.

It is important that schools are encouraged to focus on the outcomes of their students at the end of the upper-secondary phase, not just at 16, to ensure that they support young people who are leaving to make good choices, to encourage better collaboration, and – in line with a key theme of our proposals – to strengthen the sense of coherence across upper-secondary education as a whole. Even though more than two in every five 17-year-olds move to attend an FE college or sixth form college (DfE A), it should not be that their previous school can simply forget about them or ignore their progress over the next two or three years.

Chapter 8 looks at this issue in more detail, but in summary our proposal is that further sophisticated data should be collected and made openly available to show how cohorts of young people are progressing over the entirety of their upper-secondary education. This should include where they move to, what they are achieving in different institutions, and where they end up in the year or two years after completing upper-secondary education. At a local, granular level this should allow institutions and commissioners with oversight to be able to make clearer judgments about the relative contributions of different institutions and to gauge how well transitions and collaborations are working to establish and sustain a coherent local upper-secondary system.

Devolution to the local level

Next, we must focus on how we can further support more coherent, locally driven delivery of upper-secondary education.

At the local level, the current upper-secondary landscape is complex and confusing. Different forms of provision are commissioned in different ways and by different people, as is the coordination of intervention where provision is poor. Local areas

⁶ That is, we support the use of the 'Attainment 8' as a headline measure to show the average absolute attainment of a cohort alongside the 'Progress 8' measure, which shows the average point increase of the cohort and is the measure that the government proposes to use to judge whether an institution has met the minimum standard. See chapter 8 for further discussion.

have very little ability to think strategically about shaping upper-secondary provision or to support collaboration.

We recommend that combined authorities (or similarly sized regions) should be able to appoint education commissioners with oversight of all upper-secondary provision⁷ in the area. The establishment of, and devolution to, these commissioners should happen at the pace that local areas demand. Having such a framework in place should allow the strategic shaping of provision in an area according to need, in terms of the amount and type of provision that is available.

Chapter 9 also sets out our expectations about the role of employers in the upper-secondary phase, making the case for local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), working with the education commissioner and directly with employers and educational institutions, to have a stronger role in bringing together business and education, in areas where this is needed.

We also propose that combined authorities should be able to request the devolution of funding for upper-secondary provision as an extension to some of the tranches of devolution that we are already seeing in places like Greater Manchester. Crucially, this should allow regions to be able to shape and prioritise upper-secondary education – within limits. Unlike policy areas such as economic priorities or transportation, where regional variation and freedom can exist relatively free from any restriction, we would argue that devolution of upper-secondary funding must occur within a national framework. So, while devolution of funding may still be subject to a national per-pupil formula or minimum funding level to ensure a consistent entitlement, there could be greater freedom of determination over aspects such as the type of work-based learning that a local area would like to promote, or the level of capital expenditure required to support an education commissioner’s strategic plans.

Fairness in funding

As presented in chapter 10, our analysis highlights the impact of the Coalition government’s decision to ringfence funding only for the 5-to-15 age-group, which has led to an increase in the funding allocated to the first half of the upper-secondary phase but significant cuts to the second half of the phase (post-16).

Our analysis also looks at the likely impacts of the recent announcements of the Conservative party, which has said it will protect in flat cash terms the 5–15 per-pupil rate only, and of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, which have each independently proposed to protect the whole education budget in real terms. Our analysis predicts that both proposals would see 5–15 per-pupil funding affected by a fairly similar real-terms cut of 6.0 per cent under the Labour and Liberal Democrat proposals or 7.2 per cent under the Conservative proposal. The impact on 16–18 funding, however, is significantly different. While the Labour and Liberal Democrat proposals would see the total post-16 budget frozen in real terms, our analysis predicts a real-terms cut to the aggregate budget of around 13.4 per cent under Conservative plans.

Our recommendation is that funding must become more equalised across the whole upper-secondary phase if the coherence and breadth of learning programmes are to be supported over the four years. Chapter 10 explores some ways of achieving this parity, including reallocating some of the increase that the 5–15 budget has seen over this parliament to the entire 5–18 budget. Any future government, while wrestling with wider spending decisions, must (a) commit to being more transparent about the average per-pupil funding rates that will apply for each age-group, and (b) think systemically about upper-secondary funding, especially if they want all of the

7 And probably beyond upper-secondary education, but that is outside the scope of this report.

upper-secondary phase to be about delivering something that is universally broader and more stretching, as we propose in this report and as is already the case in many other countries.



As noted above, the approach set out in this report is not to start from a position which recommends widespread qualification or structural reform, which has been a common starting point over recent years. Instead, our goal has been to rethink the foundations of upper-secondary education, a phase of a young person's education that is so essential to their future prospects and yet, right now, is set within a system that is so fractured and incoherent as to undercut the potential of institutions and individual young people alike. We believe that this process of rethinking – encapsulated in an agreed definition of upper-secondary education, a vision of its purpose and ambitions and a fresh focus on achieving coherence, breadth and stretch right across the four-year phase – is the essential starting point in building an educational system that England's young people need and deserve.

1. INTRODUCTION

For a young person, between the ages of 14 and 19 is undoubtedly a defining period of their life. During these years they make the fundamental transition from childhood to ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett 2004). The level of qualifications and skills they gain will affect their ultimate success in progressing into further education or employment (ONS 2014, Macintosh 2004). Their attainment also correlates with other outcomes, such as better health, greater involvement with civic activity and a reduced chance of being involved in crime (Schuller et al 2004). It is during this phase that ‘staying in or moving class is most crucially negotiated’ (Lumby and Foskett 2005: 10).

Education alone cannot provide all the answers, but as the OECD said in its latest *Education at a Glance* report:

‘It is important to have quality upper-secondary programmes that provide individuals with the right mix of guidance and educational opportunities to ensure that there are no dead-ends once students have graduated.’

OECD 2014a: 56

To provide this, England needs a distinct yet much more coherent upper-secondary system. We need to achieve clarity in our vision and purpose before we can ensure that the whole system works to help young people to meet these expectations and thrive.

The system surrounding 14 to 19 year olds has not been immune from reform over recent years. Institutions, qualifications, accountability and funding have all been subject to change under this government. At the same time, changes in the labour market, technology, employers’ demands and societal attitudes are also all putting pressure on the system to adapt the way that it acts and might act in the future.

Many have rightly called for stability in the system, to allow time for reforms to embed in preference to instigating another round of significant change. Wherever possible, this report does look at where existing policies can be built on and progress can be solidified, rather than proposing unnecessary further upheaval. The aim of this report, however, is to take a rarely attempted system-wide perspective – clarifying a vision for upper-secondary education in England, delving into what it is about the different facets of the system and the way they interact which causes the system to operate as it currently does, and identifying the changes that could lead to system-wide improvement.

In 2008, Hodgson and Spours concluded that the ‘14–19 phase in England is still fragile and largely remains a policy aspiration’ (Hodgson and Spours 2008). We conclude that this is still the case, and that, in many ways, this phase is now more fragmented, divided and less well understood than ever before. The imminent rise in the participation age to 18 provides a real opportunity to seek and achieve cross-party consensus on the overriding purpose of England’s upper-secondary education and to embark on an action plan to ensure the system can fulfil this ambition.

2. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

It is unfortunate, but necessary, to start with an analysis of the problems within the 14–19 education system. In judging the performance of the current system, it is important to remember that issues with a ‘system’ do not constitute failure across the board, nor should it detract from the impressive progress that many individual teachers and institutions are making across the country. As Lorna Unwin put it so aptly in her contribution to Alison Wolf’s review of vocational education:

‘England always has great examples of good practice. But we don’t have a good system.’

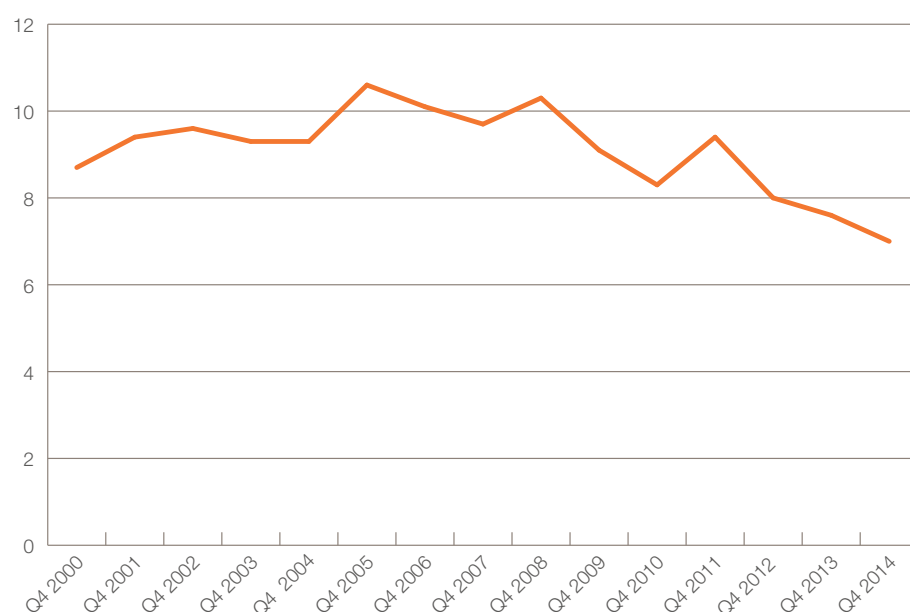
Quoted in Wolf 2011: 69

In the course of our research we have learnt from such individual examples of good practice, and some are referred to in this report. We start, however, with an assessment of what we know about how the system, in its totality, is currently performing.

There are instances of outcomes moving in a positive direction. The number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (that is, who are NEET) has continued to fall. NEET rates for 16–18-year-olds have reached their lowest quarterly point since comparable data began in 2000, with only 7.0 per cent of this age-group being recorded as NEET in the last quarter of 2014 (DfE B).

Figure 2.1

The number of 16–18-year-old people who are NEET fell to its lowest level in 2014
Percentage of 16–18-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) in England (2000–14)



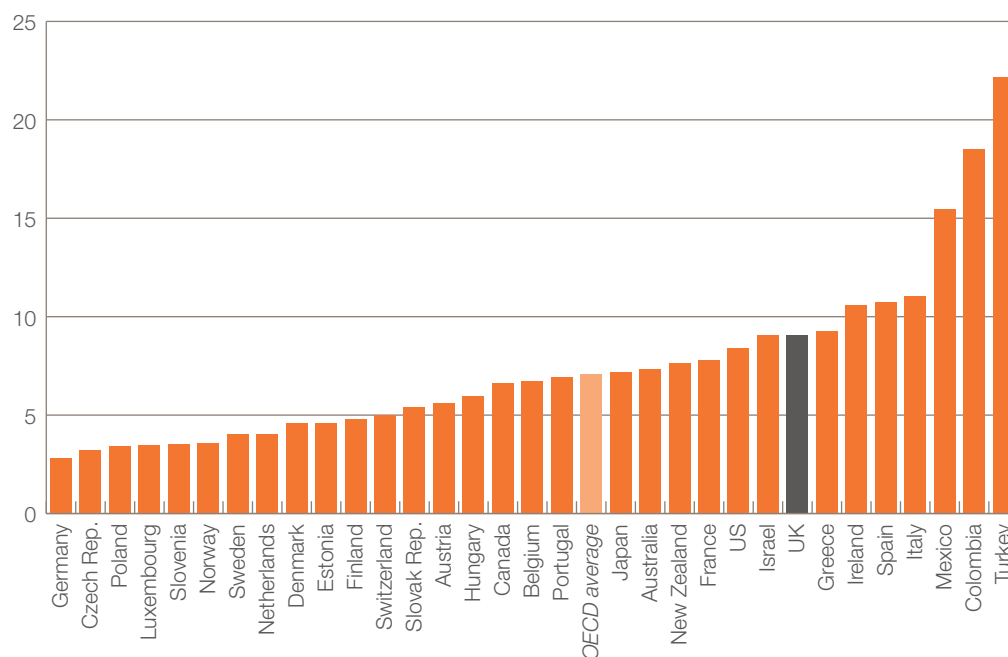
Source: DfE ‘NEET statistics quarterly brief: October to December 2014’ (DfE B)

Looking specifically at 17-year-olds, almost 90 per cent were participating in some form of education or training at the end of 2013 (DfE A). Given the previous Labour government's aspiration to have 90 per cent of 17-year-olds participating in some form of education or training by 2015 (DfES 2007), progress is clearly being made. (Increasing participating rates do pose their own new challenges, however, as is explored further at the end of this chapter.)

While the falling NEET rate is encouraging, we should not become complacent. The OECD's latest comparative figures – which IPPR has previously commented on in more detail (Evans 2014a) – show that the NEET rate in the UK⁸ continues to lag behind other countries in the OECD, and behind the OECD average, as shown in figure 2.2. The latest OECD average NEET rate for this age-group is 7.1 per cent compared to the UK's 2013 rate of 9.05 per cent (OECD A).

Figure 2.2

The UK's 15–19-year-old NEET rate lags behind the OECD average
Percentage of 15–19-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) across OECD countries (2013)



Source: OECD 'Youth not in education or employment (NEET) (indicator)' (OECD A)

The comparative basic attainment of England's young people is also questionable. In core areas, such as literacy and numeracy, England has performed woefully compared to other OECD countries. Of 24 countries, England's⁹ 16–24-year-olds are ranked 22nd for literacy and 21st for numeracy (OECD 2013). Worryingly, England is also the only country in the developed world where the literacy rate of those sampled in the 16–24 age-group was exceeded by that of their parents (or to be more precise, those aged between 55 and 65) age-group. Finally, the survey looked at 'problem-solving in a technologically rich environment', where again England ranked a disappointing 16th out of 20 countries.

8 In this case, the OECD uses figures for the UK rather than for England, although this report focusses on the latter.

9 This OECD survey did not look at the performance of Scotland and Wales.

It is also interesting to consider some analysis of how the apparent improvement of England's young people in national tests, such as GCSEs, translates or not to our comparative performance internationally.

There are two important cross-national studies that track comparative educational performance over time: the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Now, their results should certainly not be taken as the be-all and end-all in setting education policy, and there has previously been academic criticism of the weight given in England to our performance in these studies (see for example Jerrim 2011). Nevertheless, what is clear from the research of Robert Coe, for one, is that despite an increase in GCSE achievement – particularly over the 10 years – England's performance in international surveys has been, at best, mixed (Coe 2013). Professor Coe has also shown what the rise in GCSE results between 1995 and 2011 – during which time the proportion of students achieving five A*–C grades leapt from 44 per cent to 80 per cent – would look like if mapped on the PISA scale. As shown in figure 2.3, that GCSE rise is equivalent to 99 points on the PISA scale. Professor Coe concludes:

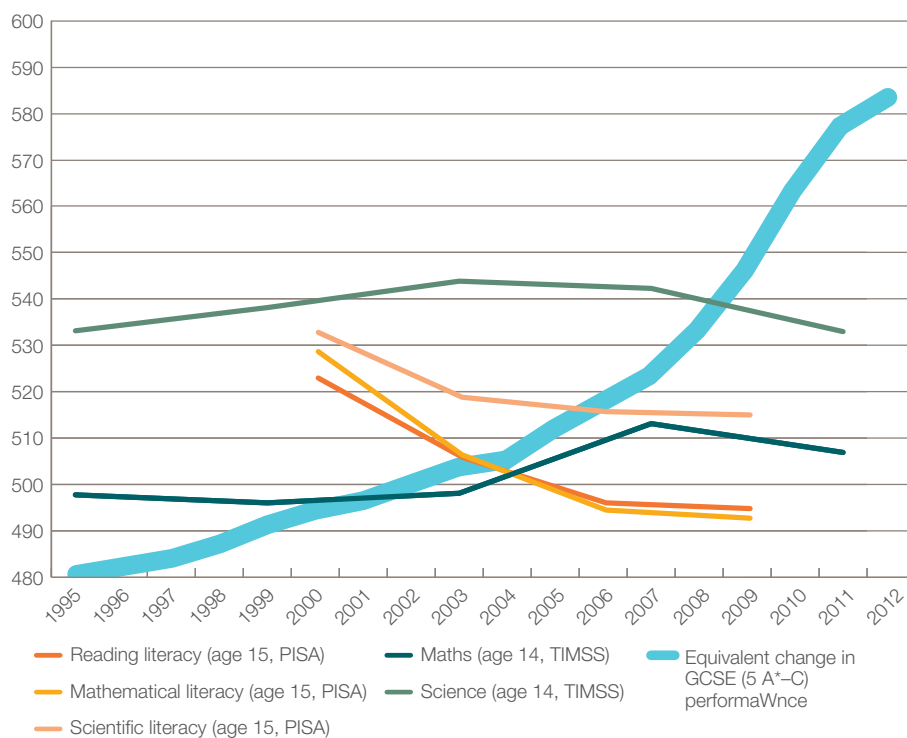
'Even half the improvement that is entailed in the rise in GCSE performance would have lifted England from being an average performing OECD country to being comfortably the best in the world. To have doubled that rise in 16 years is just not believable.'

Coe 2013: v

Figure 2.3

Increases in GCSE attainment in England are not matched by improvement in international surveys

Performance of England in national tests (GCSEs) mapped against performance in international surveys, 1995–2012



Source: Adapted from Coe 2013

To return to the national picture, a central concern continues to be the number of young people who are leaving education or training at 16 (or, given imminent changes in the participation age, at 18) without sufficient qualifications. While arguably the upper-secondary phase is not solely about achieving qualifications – a theme we will explore further – we nonetheless cannot ignore the fact that the achievement of level 2 and level 3 qualifications has a significant impact on future employability.

It is clear to see the impact that higher qualifications have on employment rate. Looking at the 2011 census figures for 16–64-year-olds, only 45 per cent of those with no qualifications are employed, compared to 70 per cent with five or more GCSEs or equivalent and 73 per cent with two or more A-levels or equivalent (ONS 2014).

Table 2.1

A higher qualifications level correlates with a higher employment rate
Employment rates according to a person’s highest level of qualification, by age-group (2011 census figures)

	No qualifications	Other qualifications	1–4 GCSEs or equivalent	5+ GCSEs or equivalent	Appren'ship	2+ A-levels or equivalent	Degree level or above
			Level 1	Level 2	Level 2+	Level 3	Level 4+
16–24	24.1	47.1	43.5	49.7	83.6	52.9	73.2
25–64	48.5	72.3	73.8	78.3	80.7	83.5	85.3
Total: 16–64	45.3	69.4	67.4	70.2	81.2	73.4	84.2

Source: ONS 2014

Significant progress has been made in increasing level 2 and level 3 attainment among the upper-secondary age-group. Nonetheless, the proportion who are leaving the education system having not reached this critical level is still particularly worrisome, particularly the number who still fail to reach level 2 even after a further two or three years in education.

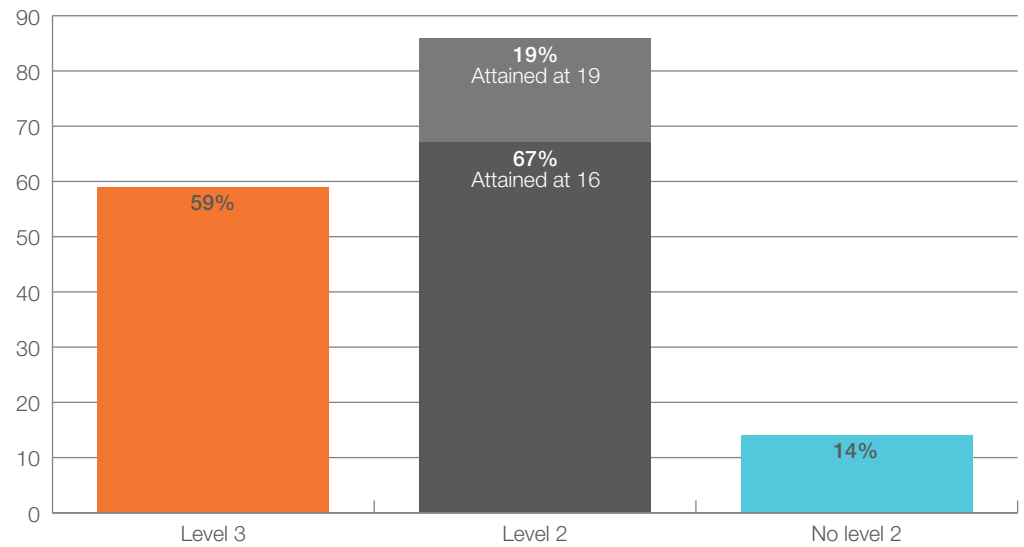
The latest figures from the Department for Education (DfE) show that, among a cohort of 640,930 young people who were 19 years old in 2013, just over 67 per cent (or 430,768) had attained level 2 at 16 (that is, in 2010), with a further 121,777 (or just over 86 per cent of the total cohort) achieving level 2 by the age of 19. That still leaves 88,448 young people, who are likely to be the hardest to reach and most vulnerable, without this basic level of attainment. In the same cohort, just over 59 per cent left at 19 with level-3 qualifications (see figure 2.4).

It is clear that the attitudes of young people are changing. Those writing 20 or so years ago worried that the English labour market encouraged many young people into low-paying jobs at 16, which ultimately limited their progression (see for example Finegold et al 1990). Whether due to the rise in the participation age, the recent decline in the availability of jobs for young people, or simply a change in societal attitudes, there has been a significant increase in the number of young people saying they intend to stay in full-time education after the age of 16. The DfE has carried out two recent longitudinal studies on young people, involving yearly interviews over a six year period, starting when the subjects were aged 13 or 14. The first started in 2004; the second commenced in 2013. In the first study, 79 per cent of those interviewed said they intended to stay in full-time education post-16; this rose to 88 per cent in the second study. More also expected to progress into higher education in the second study (Baker et al 2014).

Figure 2.4

A significant proportion of young people are leaving education without achieving crucial level 2 qualifications

Highest level of qualification attained by members of the cohort who were 19 in 2013 (%)



Source: DfE 'Level 2 and 3 attainment by young people aged 19 in 2013' (DfE C)

With more young people in education, it becomes even more imperative that we refocus our thinking about what this extended period in secondary education should offer them.

3.

LEARNING FROM HISTORY

Reforming education for the 14–19 age-group was a significant, public priority for Labour between 2002 and 2010. Although this phase of education was increasingly on the minds of educationalists and academics at the end of the 20th century (see for example Hodgson and Spours 1997), it was not an area of real political focus before the millennium.

One of the critical pieces of research in this area was produced by IPPR 15 years ago: *A British Baccalaureat?* (Finegold et al 1990). This report criticised the divided ‘early selection, low participation’ system in England and made the case for a wholly new approach to the 14–19 age-group, including increasing participation to 18 and a particular focus on reform of qualifications and curriculum. Reports like this, alongside the work of other academics at the time, were influential in drawing vital attention to reform of 14–19 education at the beginning of the 21st century.

This chapter outlines the objectives and effects of the Labour government’s reforms, as well as more recent changes made by the Coalition government since 2010.

3.1 Participation age

There were arguably three main strands to the Labour government’s 14–19 reforms between 2002 and 2010. The first was to raise the participation age to 18, which was achieved through the Education and Skills Act 2008, applying up to 17 in 2013 and coming fully into effect for those up to 18 in September this year.

This change was of fundamental importance to the Labour party, as expressed by Ed Balls, then education secretary, who said:

‘Raising the education age to 18 ... will be one of the most durable legacies of this Labour government ... In no area of the education system has comprehensive and systematic reform been as long-awaited, and nowhere is it more important.’

Balls 2008

Changes to school leaving age or participation age have historically been controversial. This is particularly so when there appears to be a lack of clarity over the purpose of the extension (Woodin et al 2013) or where the purpose does not seem to be genuinely about improving the learning experience of young people, as was satirically articulated by Sir Humphrey in *Yes, Prime Minister*:

‘We didn’t raise it to enable them to learn more. We raised it to keep teenagers off the job market and hold down the unemployment figures.’

BBC 1988

Labour was clearly aware of this potential line of criticism, with Ed Balls emphasising his determination not to make the ‘same mistake as in 1972, when there was little thought given to what young people would actually do in their extra year of schooling’ (Balls 2007). Indeed, it was important that raising the participation age was seen as only one strand or building-block of the overall 14–19 reform programme. The Education and Skills Act 2008 provided six years for the increase to take full effect, and in this period Labour also embarked on an ambitious package of reforms to qualifications, curriculum and governance. The intention seems to have been not only

to change how long young people had to remain in education or training, but also to completely change the offer that they received while they were there.

Crucially, unlike many other elements of Labour's 14–19 reforms, the raising of the participation age is one change that has endured under the current government, and will take full effect in autumn of this year.

3.2 Curriculum and qualifications

It is worth reviewing the multitude of 14–19 qualification and curriculum reforms that were seen by the Labour government as the 'centrepiece' of their education programme (DfES 2005b), in an attempt to avoid the collective amnesia that frequently works to undermine policymaking. The boxed text below attempts a summary timeline of key initiatives, decisions and effects of the Labour government's reforms.

The original vision in 2003, and the direction pursued by the Tomlinson working group,¹⁰ was to completely overhaul the qualification and curriculum offer and to develop for the first time a unified 14–19 framework. Sadly, this vision never materialised, particularly once it seems to have been decided in 2004 that scrapping A-levels and GCSEs would be a dangerous move politically. This left the newly proposed diplomas as a separate 'brand' of qualification, and their complexity – especially alongside the continued existence of A-levels and GCSEs, which were simpler and well understood – meant it was difficult for this qualification to succeed, however great the investment made in it. Even as the separate, stand-alone qualification they eventually became, the diplomas have withered under the current government, with subsequent claims suggesting that more than £300 million was wasted on these new qualifications (Paton 2011).

As we have reflected on previously (Evans 2014a), this period highlights the difficulty of trying to start with fundamental curriculum and qualification reform. This is particularly the case when the existing qualifications have such a strong brand – here, GCSEs and A-levels – and is exacerbated further still if the visionary driving force starts to show signs of weakening or cracking. This crucial lesson informs our decision in this report not to presuppose or begin with a model of curriculum and qualification reform in mind.

Timeline of Labour reforms to 14–19 education

2002: The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published a consultation entitled *14–19 Education: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (DfES 2002). Recommendations included a less prescriptive key stage 4 curriculum, more vocational learning, and an overarching 'matriculation diploma' to sit above existing qualifications. At the time, many called for more radical reform of GCSEs, A-levels and vocational awards, fearing that the matriculation diplomas would simply serve as 'weak wrappers' around existing, inadequate qualifications (Hodgson and Spours 2003).

2003: DfES published a consultation on the green paper *14–19: Opportunity and excellence* (DfES 2003). This document differed significantly in its tone and approach from what had come before. It called for a working group to look at developing a more coherent learning programme for young people, based on a unified framework of qualifications and more appropriate assessment (this subsequently took shape in the form of the Tomlinson working group). This lift in the appetite for radical reform has been attributed both to the A-level grading crisis of 2002 and to the appointment of David Miliband, who had previously shown his willingness for such a shake-up (Finegold et al 1990), as minister for school standards.

¹⁰ The Working Group for 14–19 Reform, chaired by Mike Tomlinson, former chief inspector of schools at Ofsted, was formed in spring of 2003. Its proposals were set out in its final report (Tomlinson 2004), a significantly watered-down version of which provided the basis for the 2005 14–19 white paper.

2004, part A: Significant excitement and momentum had built up around the prospect of radical 14–19 qualification and curriculum reform. The Tomlinson group's final report proposed a single diploma system to gradually subsume all existing qualifications (Tomlinson 2004), and there was a feeling that this was the moment for fundamental, widespread reform of the whole qualification and curriculum structure for 14–19-year-olds (see for example Stanistreet 2004). The diploma proposed by the Tomlinson was a modular one, with young people choosing different subject modules to form an open or specialised diploma around a core of functional skills in literacy, numeracy, communication and ICT, an extended project, and 'wider activities', which were not to be assessed.

2004, part B: However, that momentum and excitement was soon deflected and deflated. The U-turn on wholesale reforms is attributed to a speech by the prime minister, Tony Blair, to the CBI in October 2004, in which he said: 'GCSEs and A-levels will stay. So will externally marked exams' (Blair 2004). The failure to mention diplomas, and the insistence that the existing qualifications would remain, has often been seen as the nail in the coffin for the fundamental reforms proposed by the Tomlinson group.

2005: DfES, under education and skills secretary Ruth Kelly, published the *14–19 Education and Skills* white paper (DfES 2005a). This paper confirmed that the government would not be pursuing the Tomlinson group's main recommendation of a unified diploma system. A-levels and GCSEs would remain as 'cornerstones of the new system' (ibid: 6) and more than a dozen 'specialised diplomas' for vocational progression would be introduced. A *14–19 Implementation Plan* was also published (DfES 2005b), moving the agenda swiftly on to implementation and the development of a new and, critically, separate diploma system.

2007/2008: The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), now under Ed Balls as secretary of state and Gordon Brown as prime minister, appeared to take yet another slightly different tack. Although there was no return to attempting to achieve a truly unified system, nevertheless the introduction of three academic diploma lines in 2007 (in science, languages and humanities) indicated an intention to establish diplomas as a general option bridging the academic and vocational divide, rather than as a purely vocational option. Extended diplomas were also announced which, as the equivalent of 4.5 A-levels, were intended to stretch the most able students. In 2008, a consultation document on the government's *14–19 Qualifications Strategy* was published (DCSF 2008a), establishing four 14–19 routes (GCSE and A-levels, diplomas, apprenticeships and the foundation learning tier) and proposing that diplomas would ultimately subsume and replace other broad vocational qualifications.

2010 onwards: Within a month of entering office, the current government stopped both the development of the extended diploma and the three academic diploma lines. With only 9,568 students sitting the diploma in 2013, examination boards also announced that they would no longer be offering the diploma as a complete course (although exam boards are still offering component parts of the course, such as the extended project qualification).

3.3 Local collaboration

The Labour government's reforms were underpinned by a focus on local collaboration between 14–19 institutions. In 2008, DCSF said:

'It is strong local partnerships of providers that will deliver improved learning and support for all young people. Across the country, consortia, 14–19 partnerships and local authorities are already showing how increased collaboration is a vital component of this.'

DCSF 2008b: 11

Some were fairly critical of the apparently conflicting principles of the government with respect to education, promoting autonomy and competition on the one hand, collaboration on the other, which led them to conclude that the system was weakly collaborative yet strongly competitive (Hodgson and Spours 2006).

Nevertheless, against this backdrop, the third main strand of Labour's 14–19 programme was an explicit focus on collaboration as a vehicle for delivering the reforms, encouraged and enforced through a range of policy, legislative and funding

levers. The Education and Skills Act 2008 obliged local authorities to promote participation in their area, and included a specific duty to promote cooperation between 14–19 providers, the local authority and other partners. It also enabled local authorities to set up joint arrangements for cooperation on 14–19 education or training. This was followed by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, which went further still, imposing a duty on local authorities to secure a sufficient level of suitable education and training to meet the needs of all 14–19-year-olds in their area. Indeed, although the role of local authorities in education has evolved significantly under the current government, particularly due to significant reductions in funding and reduced control over a number of schools, it is important to note that local authorities still have this statutory role with regards to 14–19 provision.

These legislative interventions came fairly late in the term of office of the Labour government. Previously, other policy mechanisms had worked to support collaboration in this field, including the promotion and funding of 14–19 ‘Pathfinders’. In total there were 39 Pathfinders: 25 which began operation in phase one, starting in January 2003, and a further 14 in phase two from September 2003. Pathfinders were funded and managed by DfES and the Learning Skills Council, a government quango at the time. Together, these two bodies provided £10 million at the outset and £16 million in 2003/04 to support both the phase one and phase two pathfinders (Higham and Yeomans 2005).

These bodies had an important yet very broad remit. Essentially, they were funded to develop successful and innovative modes of 14–19 delivery in an area, delivered through partnerships. Government documentation (DfES 2002) at the time indicated that Pathfinders should:

- test out a range of ideas and discover new ones
- develop best practice in 14–19 education and training to guide the steps to, and pace of, a national roll-out
- identify barriers to a coherent 14–19 phase and design ways to overcome them
- demonstrate that the reforms can work in a variety of locations with different social circumstances and different mixes of schools and colleges.

There were several government-commissioned reviews of the Pathfinders programme. The conclusions from one such review were that there had been ‘the development of substantial collaborative arrangements’, alongside a clearer emphasis on 14–19 as a coherent phase and with a distinct entitlement. However, the review was clear that this legacy was not necessarily attributable to the Pathfinder concept per se, although the associated funding was likely to have ‘accelerated development’ (Higham and Yeomans 2005).

The final key way in which the previous government insisted on collaboration was through its ‘diploma gateway’ process. Groups of schools, colleges, employers, higher education institutions and other local education partners were only *allowed* to deliver diplomas if they were part of an approved consortium with demonstrable plans for collaboration. Interestingly, while the Labour government was clearly keen to promote collaboration as an integral strand of its 14–19 reforms, and in 2008 celebrated the fact that there were already ‘140 consortia in place’ (DCSF 2008b), the evaluations of the first diploma cohorts stated that it was ‘widely acknowledged that collaboration only worked well when it developed organically, rather than being imposed’ (McCrone et al 2010).

In 2010, the current government abolished the requirement for institutions to work collaboratively in an approved consortium in order to deliver a diploma.

3.4 Changes under the Coalition government

The original vision for wholesale reform of the 14–19 phase which lay behind Labour’s initiatives, and the measures to ensure their enforcement, have undeniably and deliberately been weakened by the Coalition government (Foley 2014). This has not stopped it from trying to change and improve education for this age-group through its own set of reforms, although its vision has been qualitatively different and there is less focus on an overarching 14–19 or upper-secondary phase.

The following boxed text summarises the main policies that the current government has introduced affecting 14–19-year-olds. There is no analysis or commentary on the policies at this point in the report: future chapters will reflect on the impact of the latest reforms, where they leave us, and what needs to happen next.

When looking at these policies it is worth bearing in mind the overarching vision for all of education – not just this age-group – which lies behind the Coalition’s reforms. As set out in the 2010 white paper, this government’s reforms have been motivated by a desire to give ‘greater autonomy to the front line’, to ‘support the school system to become more effectively self-improving’, supported by ‘an uncompromising emphasis on higher standards’ (DfE 2010). These elements of autonomy and increased rigour can be seen flowing through many of the policies that have been pursued since.

Summary of Coalition government reforms to 14–19 education

Institutional

- New free schools, some of which are specifically for 16–19-year-olds
- Increasing numbers of academies, some of which have used the process and new freedoms to apply for a new sixth form
- New specific 14–19 institutions: university technical colleges and studio schools
- Encouraging colleges to use the legal right to enroll students directly at 14 on a full-time basis, and developing specialist career colleges.

Funding

- Ringfencing 5–16 funding only
- Cuts to the budget for 16–18-year-olds by about 10 per cent in real terms (see chapter 10 for more information)
- Reducing funding for 18-year-olds to £3,300 per pupil from September 2014
- Switching funding for 16–18-year-olds to a programme rather than qualification basis.

Qualifications

- Reform of A-level content, led by universities
- Reform of GCSEs – revised, more stretching content
- General drive to make qualifications linear, more externally assessed
- Undertaking the Wolf review of vocational qualifications/tech levels
- Scrapping Labour plans for academic/extended diplomas; wider diplomas allowed to wither.

Accountability

- Changing accountability at 16 away from an attainment measure based on five or more A*–C grades towards a progress measure across ‘best eight’ subjects
- Introducing stronger 16–19 accountability, incorporating and assessing attainment, progress, completion/retention and destination
- Introducing the English baccalaureate measure at 16, which counts students who have achieved a C in English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences,¹¹ and a language

11 An individual student is counted as achieving ‘the sciences’ if they have (a) achieved an A*–C in both core and additional science or (b) achieved an A*–C in at least two of the three single sciences (biology, chemistry, physics or computer science) or (c) achieved an A*–C in the double science award.

- Introducing the technical baccalaureate at age 18, obtained upon achieving a level 3 vocational attainment, a core mathematics qualification and an extended project
- Reorienting performance tables to count only vocational qualifications that are approved by the 'Wolf process'
- Changes to Ofsted: a return to a common inspection framework for pre- and post-16 provision; discontinuation of Ofsted's area-wide 14–19 inspections.

Apprenticeships

- Instigating the Trailblazers process to ensure that apprenticeship standards are 'employer-led'
- Introducing the apprenticeship grant for employers (AGE), which provides £1,500 to any business with less than 50 employees that takes on a 16–18-year-old apprentice, having not had one in the 12 months before, to a limit of five
- Giving employers control over apprenticeship funding; it was confirmed in the 2015 budget that this will be achieved through a new voucher system (HMT 2015)
- Developing traineeships to give young people essential work preparation training, mathematics and English skills, and work experience needed to progress into an apprenticeship or other job.

Other

- Moving the statutory responsibility for careers advice and guidance from local authorities to schools
 - Removing funding from Connexions; developing the National Careers Service and announcing a 'careers company' for young people
 - Removing the statutory duty for all schools to provide work-related learning at key stage 4
 - Removing funding for the education maintenance allowance (EMA)
 - Making the decision not to enforce punitive elements of the participation age legislation that would have seen young people facing fines if they did not participate and employers facing fines if they employed young people but did not provide training.
-

4.

DEVELOPING A CLEAR DEFINITION AND VISION FOR UPPER-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

Before making any specific policy recommendations, it is important to be clear up-front about the answers to several integral questions:

- Should there be a concept of upper-secondary education or a ‘14–19 phase’ in England? Is there such a concept currently?
- Are upper-secondary education and 14–19 education the same thing?
- If we believe there should be a stronger concept of an upper-secondary education, what factors currently prevent that?
- What should the shared vision for this phase be?

4.1 Defining upper-secondary education

As set out in the introduction to this report, the OECD emphasises the importance of a strong upper-secondary phase of education that provides educational opportunities and guidance to ensure that no young person hits a dead-end when they leave the system (OECD 2014a).

In England, by contrast, there seems to be no consensus on what we even mean by an ‘upper-secondary’ phase of education. Does this mean 14–16, or 14–18? Is this what we mean by 14–19 education, or some other variation?

This is a definitional question, and as such it must be resolved before we can outline the purpose or shape of such a phase. We attempt here to explore how England’s poorly defined ‘upper-secondary’ phase has been conceived historically, before proposing a definition to frame our vision and subsequent recommendations.

Looking at any attempts to map out different countries’ education systems,¹² it is interesting that the OECD would normally point to the 14–18 age range, spanning level 2 and level 3 qualifications, as England’s ‘upper-secondary’ phase. Others would define it differently, with Alison Wolf, for example, noting in her report that ‘in England, the term upper-secondary is sometimes used to refer to key stage 4’ – that is, to the key stage applying between the ages of 14 and 16 (Wolf 2011).

It could be argued that such confusion originates in changes to the participation age, where previously the compulsory element of secondary-level education or training ended at age 16. However, even prior to the change in the UK’s participation age to 18, the OECD saw our ‘upper-secondary’ phase as extending beyond 16 to 18, most probably because this describes the period prior to entering ‘tertiary education’. Therefore, even before we give any consideration to the 14–19 concept, there are already two competing definitions of the upper-secondary phase: 14–16 and 14–18.

12 This is not done frequently or consistently, but the OECD did make an attempt in 1997 – for their schematic rendering of the two British systems, see: http://gpseducation.oecd.org/Content/MapOfEducationSystem/UKM/UKM_1997_EN.pdf

In the educational world at least, there has also been significant attention given to the ‘14–19’ phase or concept over the last 15 years, and some academics have argued for a universal English upper-secondary education system to provide for this age-group (Hodgson and Spours 2012). Although it is not clear, from the literature and discussions with experts who have been involved over this period, that there is any agreed origin or rationale for this particular age-range – or, more specifically, for 19 as its endpoint – we attempt an explanation in the boxed text below.

Why do we talk about 14–19 as a phase?

Despite the focus on the 14–19 phase during the previous Labour government’s term in office, it does not seem that much public explanation was given as to why this was the precise age-range of interest. The English focus on the 14–19 age-range is also particularly interesting, given that in most other OECD countries the upper-secondary phase is considered to start at 15 or even 16, and given that England’s participation age legislation only applies until a person turns 18, with many students still being 18 when they enter university or work. So it is arguable that 14–19 both starts early and ends late, relative to these other systems and outcomes.

The historic structure of the English curriculum seems to explain the starting age of the phase. Fourteen broadly equates to a young person’s age at the start of Year 10 which, in England, also denotes the start of key stage 4. This key stage – the last of the four key stages defined in the Education Reform Act 1988¹³ – is also the point at which a young person first has to make choices about the subjects they study. This choice, albeit fairly limited at this early stage, indicates that they have entered the period of transition to adulthood and therefore the ‘upper-secondary phase’.

It is more difficult to explain 19 as the endpoint of the phase. As noted already, the statutory requirement to participate in education only applies until a young person’s 18th birthday and many young people do finish formal education in the year they turn 18. However, according to research commissioned by the Association of Colleges, about 20 per cent of 16–18-year-olds were already aged 18 at the beginning of the 2012/13 academic year (RCU 2013). These young people will effectively be taking a fifth year of upper-secondary education for a variety of reasons – personal circumstances may have disrupted their education; poor GCSE performance may require an extra year to retake these qualifications before being able to access level 3 qualifications; a year may be spent pursuing academic or vocational level 3 qualifications before deciding to pursue a different route, and so on. In any of these scenarios, an extra year in upper-secondary education is likely to be needed and, until recently (see chapter 10), this was funded at the same rate as for 16 and 17-year-olds.

It is important that any upper-secondary phase is inclusive and has the flexibility to cater for the significant portion of young people who require at least a fifth year to complete a broad programme of study, and we think it is for this reason that we talk of a phase that includes 14–19-year-olds.

The multiplicity of these definitions – and the confusion they cause – stems from the fact that a holistic view of upper-secondary education does not exist. Any coherence that the previous government may have been attempting to bring to this phase has been undermined both by the elements of the old system which they retained and by those that have been developed since.

From a political perspective, the historical analysis in the previous chapter shows that the Labour government during the 2000s was much more explicit than the current Coalition government is about the concept of ‘14–19 education’ with an extended, more unified period of learning. This is evident in everything from the number of documents and consultations that were focussed specifically on reforming 14–19 education, through to the amount invested into attempting (albeit unsuccessfully) to redesign the qualifications system and supporting Pathfinders specifically for this age-group.

13 The precise definition being the year in which the majority of pupils attain the age of 15.

Research conducted in 2008 asked 23 active players in education about the 14–19 phase (see Hodgson and Spours 2008). It is interesting to note that these actors considered the 14–19 phase to be a ‘given’; rather than dwelling on existential questions, they turned instead to how it should be organised and delivered. It would be interesting to know if that would still be the case, with public promotion of and funding support for 14–19 education having been so drastically reduced in years since.

It is clear that ‘14–19 education’ has not been as conspicuous in the mindset or rhetoric of the Coalition government since it came to power in 2010, although as a concept it does not appear to have been forgotten completely. Relatively recent investigations, such as Alison Wolf’s into vocational education, have been explicitly commissioned to look at provision for the ‘14 to 19 age-group’, and a new wave of discrete 14–19 institutions, in the form of university technical colleges (UTCs) and studio schools, have been established.

Still, the language of some of the most important reviews in this area is striking insofar as it suggests that there is no unanimous agreement on 14–19 as a phase. For example, the Skills Taskforce’s third review of qualifications boldly states that ‘14–19 matters’ (Skills Taskforce 2014), whereas Wolf was seemingly clear in her view that 14–16 and 16–19 education should be seen as distinct phases (Wolf 2011).

It is apparent that many different definitions and age-ranges have come to describe the period after a young people makes their first significant set of subject choices at the end of Year 9. Also, it is arguable that the phrase ‘14–19 education’ is now so politically loaded and associated with a particular Labour government as to be unhelpful as a shorthand description of upper-secondary education – especially if cross-party consensus on the existence of and vision for this vital phase is ever to be achieved.

From this point forward in the report, therefore, we will talk about improving **upper-secondary education**, as opposed to 14–19 education or any other variation. In the context of this report – and hopefully, in the future, by wider consensus – we take that to mean:

‘...the educational experience of a young person which starts at the beginning of Year 10 and typically lasts four years until the end of the academic year in which they turn 18. This is the period through which all young people will be expected to complete a broad, stretching and coherent programme of study, building up a collection of knowledge, skills and experience to allow them to transition into a prosperous, flexible and rewarding adulthood.’

In addition, for a proportion of young people a fifth year may be needed to complete this stretching programme before they are ready to make the transition to higher education, training or work. In those scenarios, it is right that this flexibility should be maintained in the system to ensure it is inclusive, subject to them continuing to work towards achieving the broad programme of study described above.

Recommendation 1: Government should commit quickly to our definition of upper-secondary education, to using it consistently, and to ensuring policymaking always considers how change will bring coherence rather than fragmentation to this phase.

4.2 Bringing coherence to a fragmented system

Even if consensus on our vision of a four-year upper-secondary phase can be agreed and political and frontline buy-in for it can be secured, there are many components of the current system that would nevertheless continue to undermine this sense of coherence and integrity. This situation has led commentators to surmise that upper-secondary education is currently ‘a set of arrangements, rather than a system as such’ (Hodgson and Spours 2012). Particularly worrying is the obvious break in the system at age 16.

Many of the elements described below will be unpicked and investigated further as we go on to make recommendations throughout this report. Here, however, we summarise four main areas or issues which work against our achieving a coherent upper-secondary system in England today, and which form the focus of later chapters of this report.

1. **Institutional complexity and choice:** Diversity of provision is, in itself, not a bad thing, particularly where such diversity allows young people to choose freely between different styles and forms of learning according to their needs and preferences. The English landscape remains particularly complex, however, and a young person in upper-secondary education might be studying in any one of a multitude of different institution types.¹⁴ The English tradition remains that nearly all young people change institution at the age of 11 to begin secondary education, with a high proportion changing again at 16. It remains highly unusual to spend your whole upper-secondary education in one institution; however, it is even more unusual to move at the beginning of upper-secondary education, that is, for the beginning of Year 10. The typical points of institutional change, therefore, do not match up well with the age-range of the upper-secondary phase.

Unfortunately the institutional choices for young people are not always fair and open either. Institutions are rewarded financially according to the number of students they retain and are held to account for the performance of those students. The system may therefore incentivise institutions to actively encourage a young person to stay in an institution or move elsewhere, not because it is the best choice available, but because it provides the best return to that institution, financially or in terms of performance. Chapters 7 and 8 explore two potential options for tipping the balance towards increased choice for young people and more collaboration between providers.

In parallel with this institutional diversification, the system for oversight of provision has become increasingly fragmented. Maintained schools continue to be overseen by local authorities, while academies, free schools, UTCs and studio schools are now overseen by eight regional schools commissioners; FE colleges remain free from any local oversight whatsoever, being accountable only to a national FE commissioner. Chapter 9 considers how we can enable greater local oversight, development and coherence of upper-secondary provision.

2. **Curriculum:** The national curriculum only applies up to 16 – and then, statutorily, only for maintained schools, not academies and free schools. While a clear, albeit very high-level statement of the aims of the national curriculum for ages 5–16 does exist, this does not extend to 16–18-year-olds. This is in contrast to countries and regions such as Australia, Finland and Alberta, Canada, all of which have curriculums to cover education right up to 18 or 19. Again, in England, an effective break or endpoint at age 16 is being preserved that undermines the wider coherence of the upper-secondary phase.
3. **Accountability:** Despite most young people now staying in education until 18 or 19, and attempts to strengthen post-16 accountability, the most intense focus continues to fall on GCSE attainment at age 16. This perhaps stems from the fact that GCSEs remain the benchmark in the public mind, and because this is the only point at which attainment and progress across secondary schools can be compared before many pupils move on to other, non-school institutions. While public accountability is important, such a strong

¹⁴ In the state sector alone, the list includes: 11–16 and 11–18 maintained schools; 11–16, 11–18 and 16–19 academies and free schools; sixth form colleges; 14+ or (more commonly) 16+ further education (FE) colleges; and new 14–19 institutions in the form of university technical colleges (UTCs) and studio schools.

emphasis on examinations at 16 seems to split the upper-secondary system into two two-year blocks. Chapter 8 explores what could be done to shift this emphasis towards the end of the upper-secondary phase, while continuing to hold 11–16 institutions to account for students' progress.

4. **Funding:** Compared internationally, public education spending in the UK continues to be generous. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure increased by about 10 per cent in the UK between 2008 and 2011, which was the fourth largest increase among OECD countries (OECD 2014b). But while overall education spending has increased, inequalities have also increased. It is widely accepted that there is significant variation in per-pupil amounts from region to region within the UK (Chowdry and Sibieta 2011), a problem which the government has been trying to correct to some extent through their introduction of minimum funding levels (DfE D).

However, the ringfencing of schools funding for those aged 5 to 15 put in place during this parliament has introduced an increasing inequality between pre- and post-16 funding. Our analysis shows that the budget for 5–15-year-olds has increased in nominal terms by 13.5 per cent between 2010/11 and 2014/15, while the budget for 16–18-year-olds has decreased by 9.1 per cent in nominal terms over the same period. The government also opted to make a cut to the budget for 18-year-olds (those who are already 18 at the start of the academic year and are undertaking a fifth year of upper-secondary education), meaning that an affected student now attracts a flat rate of £3,300 in attributed funding, as opposed to £4,000 for a 16 or 17-year-old – a 17.0 per cent cut. It seems difficult to justify the significant dip in post-16 funding, especially when the average independent school charges post-16 fees that are 4.8 per cent higher than their pre-16 fees (ISC 2014).

While all parties face tough choices about government spending in the next parliament, our analysis in chapter 10 looks back across the 2010–15 parliament and ahead to the next to analyse how funding across the upper-secondary phase could be more fair.

4.3 Discovering a shared vision for upper-secondary education

Having defined upper-secondary education, and having briefly looked at the elements of the current system which undermine its coherence at the moment, the following section proposes a vision for the phase that, if agreed and widely shared, could then inspire and drive the policy detail and action that follows.

We seek to discover this vision by looking at two perspectives:

1. What is the purpose of the upper-secondary phase?
2. What do we want a 19-year-old who is leaving the upper-secondary phase to be equipped with?

For those, such as Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours, who have put years into campaigning for a stronger universal upper-secondary education system, much time has also been spent thinking the purpose of, and case for, the phase.

The focus on a universal purpose for upper-secondary education is important. As Richard Pring has put it: 'the absence of shared aims and values ... is the result of policymaking being dominated by the limited concept of academic and vocational' (Pring 2007). In a IPPR previous report, we were clear that that putting too much focus on achieving parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications is a misguided aim (Evans 2014a). What is important, however, is to establish a vision or sense of purpose for an upper-secondary education that applies to all young people regardless of whether they are following an academic or vocational route.

In their 2008 book, Hodgson and Spours suggested four purposes of an upper-secondary education phase, which we think are useful as guiding principles here:

1. the skills case
2. the social cohesion and social justice argument
3. preparation for adult life and engagement with wider society
4. equity and universality versus choices in a divided system.

Hodgson and Spours' four principles for 14–19 education

The skills case: We continue to support the statements made by IPPR in 1990 that: 'Education is not primarily about narrow preparation for work, but rather preparation for adult life, of which work and continuing education are a part' (Finegold et al 1990).

Increasingly, education is also being recognised for its intrinsic link to the economy. National education and training systems are seen as providing comparative economic advantages, both through the training up of the workforce and through education as an economic commodity itself (Barnes et al 2012).¹⁵

While some short-term labour market projections are helpful, in terms of informing a young person's individual choices, it is also important to recognise that the role of upper-secondary education should be not be limited to training our young people up for specific jobs. After all, these jobs may not exist down the line, and our young jobseekers may be left without the flexible skills and knowledge to adapt. As a stark illustration of these risks, it was recently discovered that the Yorkshire and Humberside regional strategy review of 1975 had predicted a need to recruit about 6,000 young men each year to match the increased output of the coal mining industry by 1985 (DoE 1976). Given the subsequent decline in the mining industry, this prediction shows the dangers of relying too heavily on labour market forecasting in skilling up young people for specific roles.

Nonetheless the need to ensure young people are globally competitive is important, and we believe that the upper-secondary phase is critical here. The upper-secondary phase should provide the opportunity to acquire the skills and qualifications that will ultimately allow young people to access employment and to adapt their capacities, knowledge and skills in a flexible way. As economist Wolfgang Streeck has put it, we must equip young people with 'skills as a general polyvalent resource that can be put to many different, and most importantly, as yet unknown future uses' (Streeck 1989).

The social cohesion and social justice argument: Evidence shows that those who stay in education longer and gain higher qualifications are more likely to be in employment (Macintosh 2004) and are generally likely to have better outcomes in areas such as health, civic participation and lower involvement in crime (Schuller et al 2004). While this may be simply an inherent link – indicative of a single underlying, interior cause – there is also a case that one purpose of a longer, more coherent period of upper-secondary education is to enable young people to leave upper-secondary education as more socially minded and aware citizens.

Preparation for adult life and engagement with wider society: As we have set out already, we believe that the upper-secondary phase is an important transitional phase. From an inward perspective, young people are developing their own identities; from an outward perspective, they should be increasingly getting the opportunity to engage with and contribute to wider society. The upper-secondary phase therefore needs to provide space for young people to have experiences beyond the classroom that help them to develop their individual identity, cultural capital and sense of citizenship.

Equity and universality versus choices in a divided system: Many of the actors interviewed by Hodgson and Spours supported the notion that the 'raison d'être for the phase is to change the existing educational order from one dominated by selection and division to one focussed on progression and equity'. Hodgson and Spours suggest that in crystallising the purpose of an upper-secondary education system, it is necessary to choose between 'creating more effective choices in a divided system' on the one hand and 'progression and equity' on the other.

15 The education sector contributed nearly £70 billion in 2010 (2006 prices) to the UK economy (GVA) (Barnes et al 2012).

Instead, we would argue that these two positions should be seen as a succession rather than a choice. We would certainly agree that a vision for upper-secondary education should ultimately be about achieving equity for all. History has shown, however, that trying to impose uniformity on England's divided qualifications system, for instance, is a huge challenge. A dose of realism is required. While the vision should be ambitious, our curriculum recommendations focus on universal expectations for young people within a qualification system that remains divided. That is the first step in the action plan, but the ambition and next steps should ultimately be one of progression and equity.

Having looked at the upper-secondary phase from a theoretical, systemic perspective, it is also helpful to consider the more individualised perspective: what do we want a 19-year-old leaving upper-secondary education to be equipped with?

One of the best attempts at answering this question was made in the Nuffield Foundation's review of 14–19 education (Pring et al 2012). This asked a very similar question: what counts as an educated 19-year-old in this day and age?

Their conclusion was that education should provide:

- the knowledge and understanding required for the 'intelligent management of life'
- competence to make decisions about the future in the light of changing economic and social conditions
- practical capability, including preparation for employment
- moral seriousness with which to shape future choices and relationships
- a sense of responsibility for the community.

Taking these two perspectives together and reflecting on the debate and discussion that we have had with a wide range of individuals during this project, we propose the following guiding vision statement for the upper-secondary phase:

'We want the English upper-secondary education system to ensure that every young person is equipped with the knowledge, skills and capabilities to participate fully in society, whether at work or in further and higher education, and in the wider civic life of the community. This means that in their four years of upper-secondary education every young person should be given the opportunity to develop:

- **a core of subject knowledge, understanding and learning skills attained through coherent programmes of study**
- **good levels of literacy and numeracy, at a minimum equivalent to GCSE grade C, but with many going further as they pursue these subjects throughout their whole upper-secondary education**
- **the cultural resources and capabilities to approach adulthood with independence, confidence and creativity**
- **an understanding of democratic and social citizenship that will enable them to benefit from and contribute to wider society.'**

Clearly this is only one attempt at defining a vision for upper-secondary education. If ours leads to further attempts at refining or revising the vision statement before it is adapted and promoted then that would be equally encouraging. As the Nuffield review acknowledged, 'there is a need in policy, and in provision and practice of education, for a clear vision of what all these interventions and investments of money and effort are for' (Pring et al 2012). We believe that the above is a strong attempt at establishing such a vision, but it is only if such a vision is adopted and committed to by government that a more coherent upper-secondary phase will ever be a true success.

Recommendation 2: Government should adopt or adapt our proposed statement of an overarching vision for upper-secondary education, and this should then guide policymaking and local delivery.

In cementing such a vision, it would be useful for government to do some advance thinking about the following two questions. First, within the vision for the upper-secondary system, are there elements or drivers that carry more weight than others? This helps to pre-empt the situation where a choice, rebalancing or trade-off has to be made. Second, outside the scope of this report, how does this vision match the overall vision for education as a whole, and for other phases or elements of the wider education system?

5. MOVING TOWARDS A CURRICULUM THAT LIVES UP TO THE VISION

The previous chapter has set out a guiding vision for an upper-secondary education phase. It is critical that this overarching vision is translated into a programme of study which all upper-secondary students should be following, so that they develop the attributes it outlines. The routes through which a young person will complete such broad programmes of study may vary, but having a universal expectation of the elements that should always fit into a broad upper-secondary education – however they are gained – seems important.

Critically, it has been shown repeatedly that England's upper-secondary curriculum is very narrow when compared against other successful countries' programmes. With the raising of the participation age and more young people staying in education for longer, this seems to be an appropriate moment to ask whether there is any more we could learn from other countries' upper-secondary models.

5.1 Looking at other countries' upper-secondary curricula

Reflection on the curriculum is vital if we are going to deliver on the ambition of a broader, stretching universal curriculum for all, ensuring our young people are able to keep up with the pace of change in the modern world.

Many high-performing countries have forms of curricula that, compared to England's, are significantly broader (in terms of the subjects they encompass and promote) and longer (in terms of age-range covered). In the boxed text below, we summarise some of the most interesting examples.

Upper-secondary curricula: international case studies

The broadest curricula exist in places like **Finland** and **Denmark**. In Denmark, a young student on a general upper-secondary programme (known as STX) must study a minimum of 13 subjects between the ages of 16 and 19; in Finland, there is a national core curriculum for the same age-group. It is compulsory to study:

- mother tongue and literature (either Finnish or Swedish)
- the other national language (either Finnish or Swedish depending on option above)
- foreign languages
- studies in mathematics and natural sciences
- studies in humanities and social sciences
- religion or ethics
- physical and health education
- arts and practical subjects.

All students are also given student counselling and guidance.

In Canada, many of the most successful provinces such as **Alberta** and **Ontario** have diploma systems in place. Alberta has a statutory curriculum from age 5 to 18, with the majority of young people aiming to be awarded the broad high school diploma at the end of their time in upper-secondary provision.

Ontario also has a high school diploma, which requires the acquisition of 30 credits between the ages of 14 and 18. Of these 30 credits, 18 are compulsory, covering areas

like science, languages and social sciences. There is also a compulsory literacy test at grade 10 (age 15/16) and all young people are required to participate in 40 hours of community involvement.

Even in countries such as **France** and the **Netherlands**, where there are clear technical or vocational routes, the expectation to complete a core of general education is clear. Under the French technical certificate (*brevet de technicien*) a young person is required to study French, 'introduction to the modern world', modern foreign languages, mathematics, PE and sports, alongside their technical studies. Similarly in the Netherlands there are common, compulsory components, including Dutch, English, social studies, PE and arts.

Sources: DfE 2011, SFCA 2015

Previous research has shown that, when comparing A-level programmes to other countries' upper-secondary programmes, it is possible to conclude that 'subjects within A-levels start with an advantage when judging comparative demand' (Ofqual 2014), given that an English student studying a narrower range of A-levels, will usually have been able to delve into their chosen subject/s in more depth. The same report did conclude, however, that 'elsewhere, courses normally comprise much broader offerings, a core of compulsory subjects supplemented with a number of subject specialisms.'

The Sixth Form Colleges Association also recently commissioned various organisations to look at 'costing a worthwhile curriculum'. The findings are fascinating. The paper looks solely at sixth-form education, but, in that context, it shows that many colleges have in fact been narrowing their offer as budgets have become tighter, with a drop in the number of students taking four A2 levels from 12 per cent in 2010/11 to 9 per cent in 2012/13 (SFCA 2015).

In that report, Hodgson and Spours' chapter looks in detail at other countries' offers, and confirms that England's approach 'remains uniquely narrow and short when compared with other relatively successful systems'.

The paper also looks at average contact time for those of sixth-form age and shows that England's offer does almost seem to be a 'part-time curriculum', as set out in table 5.1.

Table 5.1
Average hours of instruction in post-16 education

Country	Hours of instruction
Shanghai	30+ hours per week
Singapore	32 hours per week (4 elective subjects); 27 hours per week (3 elective subjects)
Alberta	26 hours per week
Sweden	19 hours per week, but over a three-year programme to age 20
England	19–21 hours in Year 12; less in Year 13

Source: SFCA 2015

In chapter 10, we return to the issue of how the broad programmes of study envisaged here may only be possible in reality if funding is evened out over the upper-secondary period.

5.2 The challenges of the English curriculum

For now, we turn to look at what might form the basis of a broad curriculum or programme of study for an English upper-secondary education system.

This is one area where there may need to be a distinction between the initial action needed and the ultimate ambition. In the first instance, there needs to be a clearer understanding and agreement on the curricular elements that all students should be undertaking in order that their four-year upper-secondary programme is suitably broad and demanding. There is then a secondary issue, which is that defining these elements does not answer the question of whether the elements can and should then equate to or translate into a national baccalaureate, leaving certificate or other overarching qualification, nor does it ensure that the various elements are comparable in terms of qualifications or type of experience.

This report seeks to address the former – so concluding what a universally broad and demanding programme of study should comprise – before jumping to the latter. What a broad programme of study should add up to, how elements should be assessed, and how we could one day ensure equity between different routes, are all valid questions and are being debated, as the rest of this chapter sets out. Nevertheless, in the first instance, the most important outcome should be to agree what a broad programme of study looks like over the whole upper-secondary period and to ensure that more students are achieving it.

There seem to have been two different but flawed approaches to trying to reform the upper-secondary curriculum in the past:

- The approach of the previous Labour government, described in chapter 3, recognised the importance of a broad, universal curriculum. However, they then leapt upon **wholesale qualifications reform as a way to achieve universality** – starting on a journey to develop a diploma which would apply to all. It is apparent from the course of events in the previous decade, however, that the required rate of change was immense, and that once political buy-in for the overarching vision fell away then most institutions simply resorted to what they knew. Even Michael Tomlinson, the architect of the diploma model, conceded in 2010 that ‘there remain some significant weaknesses in the diplomas as they are currently formulated’ (Mansell 2010). The cart was put before the horse. The detailed thought and wider buy-in into a vision of a universal curriculum and qualification framework had not been nurtured and developed, and so, despite heavy investment, the system soon reverted to the state of fragmentation and division that it knew and understood well.
- More recently all parties have adopted or proposed various **specific yet limited baccalaureate concepts**, such as the tech bacc and the Ebacc. While these measures, explored in more detail below, promote breadth of study for a certain group of students within a certain age-range, they do not secure broad programmes of study for all. Even the study programme concept that does exist, which has been applied to 16–19-year-olds, is limited both insofar as it is a post-16 concept only and for making different demands of those on academic and vocational routes.

5.3 Assessing the current study programme for post-16 students

Looking at the current government’s record, there have been various policies which seem to have recognised the need to encourage a broader curriculum or offer to young people.

The Wolf review into 14–19 vocational education rightly concluded that:

‘Young people need to think about their education as a whole, and institutions need to help them to do so and be rewarded for this. Policymaking, funding and oversight should encourage this rather than militating against it.’

Wolf 2011

We strongly share this sentiment. It was also the rationale for the sensible recommendation – since enacted – that post-16 provision should be funded based on study programmes rather than individual qualifications. The study programme principles, set out in DfE guidance (DfE 2014), suggest that all 16–19 students should be given the opportunity to follow a study programme that:

- provides progression to a level higher than that of their prior attainment
- includes qualification(s) that are of sufficient size and rigour to stretch the student and that are clearly linked to suitable progression opportunities in training, employment or higher levels of education
- requires students who do not already have a GCSE A*–C grade in maths and English to work towards them (or other qualifications that will act as a stepping stone for achievement of these qualifications in time)
- allows for meaningful work experience related to any vocational areas of the study programme, which develops employability skills and/or creates potential employment options for those who cannot do substantial vocational qualifications
- includes other activities unrelated to qualifications that develop the skills, attitudes and confidence that support progression.

There are several critiques that we would make of this current approach:

- In line with our wider position that the upper-secondary period should be seen as a coherent whole, we would argue that any study programme principles should look at what young people should be acquiring over the full upper-secondary period from the age of 14, not just post-16.
- The study programme is not truly universal in that one element of it, ‘meaningful work experience’, only applies to those with ‘vocational areas’ in their study programme.
- It focusses on literacy and numeracy only where there has been a failure to achieve the minimum standard previously, rather than as a universal element for all students.
- While it recognises that programmes should include other activities that are beyond qualifications, there is little to say what these elements should be achieving or should comprise – although we recognise (as discussed further below) that this is not easily resolved.

Despite the study programme idea being a positive move in many ways, it is questionable whether post-16 providers have really changed their offer as a result. In their review, Ofsted found that ‘very few providers created time for their learners to participate in non-qualification activity’ and that ‘the introduction of the study programme has led to disappointingly little change to level 3 programmes’ (Ofsted 2014). This may be due to the fact that many institutions appear not to be even aware of their new requirements. While colleges have been required to record the number and type of non-qualification activities in individual learner records, similar information has not been required of schools, in the school census for instance.

5.4 Assessing England’s ‘baccalaureates’

This fragmented picture is further complicated by the laying over top of a technical baccalaureate, or ‘tech bacc’, model that brings with it a different set of principles and requirements and which is limited to technical students only.

Both the Conservative and Labour parties have committed to this form of technical baccalaureate model, which recognises and rewards the broad, stretching achievements of those 18-year-olds who complete a level-3 vocational qualification, a level 3 ‘core maths’ qualification and an extended project.¹⁶ Again, the tech bacc applies to post-16 education only and is not universal, being reserved entirely for those undertaking vocational education.

While Labour’s skills taskforce recommended an overarching baccalaureate model, it has been unclear whether this is something the party plans to pursue. In recent speeches, while the pushing of the technical baccalaureate has been loud and clear, any equivalent commitment to a separate academic baccalaureate or an overarching baccalaureate at the end of the upper-secondary stage has not been evident (see for example Miliband 2015).

Similarly, the current government’s English baccalaureate, or ‘Ebacc’, has added further variation and discontinuity to the mix, in two ways. First, unlike the tech bacc, it applies to achievement between the ages of 14–16 across academic GCSEs.¹⁷ While superficially it might therefore look like the academic equivalent of the tech bacc, it applies to achievement across a completely different age-range. It is also worth noting that the Ebacc is not a final qualification or leaving certificate that an individual student obtains, in the way that a baccalaureate might ordinarily be understood. Indeed, at the point of ‘achieving’ the Ebacc, a young person is still likely to have two years of education remaining. Instead, the Ebacc’s purpose is to act as an accountability measure, nudging institutions’ offers towards broad, academic study. On this criterion at least, the Ebacc has had the desired effect: 23.1 per cent achieved the Ebacc in 2013/14 compared to only 15.6 per cent of pupils in 2009/10 (DfE E).

5.5 The principles of a broad upper-secondary curriculum in England

In line with our vision for a *universal* framework, a new curriculum framework must apply to all young people and encompass their achievement across the whole age-range of the upper-secondary phase.

Recommendation 3: Any future government must move towards one overarching curriculum entitlement across the whole four-year upper-secondary phase that is reflected in the learning of all young people.

A single, clear and universal expectation of the curriculum that should be the basis of every upper-secondary programme of study is important because:

- We need to recognise the **more rounded education** that all young people should be receiving and should be being rewarded for achieving.
- In the context of raising the participation age and creating a stronger upper-secondary system, we need to acknowledge all that has been learned and **experienced over the four-year period, not just post-16**. This may in time lead to different institutions tailoring how they deliver the elements of the programme over a four-year period, both to be inclusive and to stretch the most able students.

¹⁶ The technical baccalaureate models developed by both parties appear very similar – the only noticeable difference is that Labour also seems to be insisting on some requirement to show further achievement in English at 18 as well.

¹⁷ To count as having achieved an Ebacc, a student must receive a C grade in English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences (see note 11 above), and a language.

- A clear universal entitlement should act as **a floor, not a ceiling**. It should not prevent a young person from achieving more or faster, as long as breadth as well as depth continues to be achieved.
- We want the offer to be **inclusive**. It should be possible for all young people to achieve the breadth of study set out, accepting that this may be at different levels, through different qualifications and routes.

Our suggestion is that every programme of study from Year 10 to Year 13 should offer:

- **Core learning:** A young person should be able to demonstrate that through their programme of study they have achieved both a broad range of attainment and progress to a higher, stretching level of attainment. The aim should be for most young people to leave upper-secondary education with level 3 attainment, but this stretch should not come at the expense of breadth.
- **Literacy and numeracy:** The continuing expectation should be that all young people will leave upper-secondary education with level 2 English and mathematics. We believe that literacy and numeracy development should feature throughout the whole upper-secondary phase for all young people, with those who are able to achieve level 3 in these subjects to be supported to keep progressing throughout the phase. Chapter 11 reflects further on how the nature of maths and English learning and assessment may need to change in order to ensure that more young people acquire the necessary basic skills, as well as stretching those who are capable of going beyond level 2.
- **Independent application of skills:** We know that higher education institutions and the labour market want to welcome young people who not only have acquired knowledge but also are able to approach complex challenges with independence, creativity and perseverance. All young people should therefore be expected to deliver an extended project during their upper-secondary phase (as required by the tech bacc), an assessment of which is offered by several awarding bodies. A recent Ofqual study looking at other successful upper-secondary programmes concluded that ‘some of the most demanding elements of qualifications worldwide included independent projects and sustained study tasks’, both within specific subjects or cutting across whole programmes (Ofqual 2014). This is clearly something that is valued worldwide and so should be expected of all young people in England.
- **Personal and social development:** Every programme of study should offer opportunities for young people to develop the cultural capital that will allow them to benefit from and contribute to society. It is important that the curriculum, and the output that young people leave with, acknowledges the wider experience and achievements of a young person during this period. There is further discussion of how this element might evolve in the next chapter.

Simply setting out this expectation for the curriculum is no magic bullet. And reaching a consensus on the vital elements of all upper-secondary study programmes will only translate into real action if the other elements of the system – such as funding and accountability, which are discussed further below – support its transformation into a reality.

Furthermore, consensus on the vital elements of the curriculum will inevitably lead to further debate about the individual activities and qualifications which should count under each element, if and how elements such as the extended project or wider personal and social development should be assessed, and whether the completion of different elements should equate to a specific credits system or overarching baccalaureate.

5.6 Evolution towards an overarching curriculum framework for the upper-secondary phase

This report cannot and does not answer all of these questions. Elsewhere, however, this debate has already begun, with Labour's Skills Taskforce suggesting that 'the idea of an overarching baccalaureate is now centre-stage in upper-secondary policy development'. Others, such as the emerging National Baccalaureate Trust, are also exploring and trying to build consensus around this model.

Case study: Tom Sherrington and the National Baccalaureate Trust

Tom Sherrington, headteacher of Highbury Grove school and member of the headteachers' roundtable, is acting to develop and build consensus around a national baccalaureate model.

Under his leadership, Sherrington has pulled together a formidable group of other education leaders, leading academics, and representatives of awarding bodies, other baccalaureate models and the Department for Education, and in doing so has energised the debate around the form and purpose of a national baccalaureate.

Tom's blog and his paper for the headteachers' roundtable (Sherrington 2014, 2015) explain more about his vision for a baccalaureate. On his blog, he explains that the driving purpose behind the national baccalaureate is to 'create a framework that gives value to the full range of every young person's educational experiences and achievements and generates incentives for all providers to deliver a curriculum entitlement for all learners, leading to full baccalaureate accreditation at an appropriate level'.

Sherrington is starting to adapt the curriculum in his own school to deliver the baccalaureate model. The baccalaureate is mainly focussed on post-16 provision, with young people entering the sixth form choosing how to complete their personal development programme ('in terms of community service and physical, creative and cultural activities') and planning their extended project. The baccalaureate will record GCSE achievement, however, and there is an expectation that 'when students begin key stage 4, looking ahead to their sixth form experience, they will be on a path to completing their baccalaureate at the highest level possible'. In this way, then, the baccalaureate does move towards encompassing the whole upper-secondary period.

Sherrington is clear that the ambition is to turn this local variation into something national. He accepts, however – as do we – that there needs to be a conversation about and gradual evolution of any national baccalaureate concept. In particular, he refers to the need to have a strong set of core values and objectives, pointing to the clear 10-point mission statement that underpins the international baccalaureate. He is also keen that different schools should develop and share models, thus allowing the debate about key elements and assessment to spread organically, rather than a central model being imposed before the vision and change in mindset has been achieved.

Sherrington is proposing the creation of a National Baccalaureate Trust. In the first instance, this body would take on the role of promoting the concept and fostering buy-in, and continue to generate conversations around the vision and key elements. Ultimately it would take on the role of considering and validating different baccalaureate models.

In conversation, Sherrington shares the description used by upper-secondary academic and baccalaureate advocate Ken Spours, that the National Baccalaureate Trust movement is like a festival. The trust, as the organisers of the 'festival', sets the vision and starts the movement. It then allows individual institutions to come and pitch their 'tents' – or individual baccalaureate models. As more and more people join the party, conversations will emerge about the best features of particular 'tents' – or models. Crucially, however, no one has specified from the outset – as has been the tendency in qualification or curriculum reform in the past – to say that your 'tent' – or baccalaureate – has to 'look like x' or 'be shaped like y'. This seems a compelling analogy and is one that this report holds on to.

With this first part of the report having set out an overarching vision and proposal for a universal upper-secondary curriculum, the latter part looks at the other parts of the system that need to change in order for this vision to become a reality.

6.

APPRENTICESHIPS AND VOCATIONAL LEARNING

This government has significantly reformed both apprenticeships and vocational qualifications, both of which play a significant part in the upper-secondary phase.

6.1 Recent reviews of vocational education

The Wolf and Richard reviews have been influential, raising the bar on vocational qualifications and making apprenticeships more employer-led.

As noted in chapter 3, the Wolf review into vocational qualifications for this age-group was instrumental, and the government has accepted and implemented the reviews' proposals in many ways. In particular, Alison Wolf wanted to ensure that only vocational qualifications which were judged to be high-quality and rigorous and to enable progression to further study and employment were counted in key stage 4 performance tables (for pupils aged 16). A process was therefore set up to assess existing qualifications, with lists of approved qualifications being available since 2012 and reported upon for the first time in January 2015.

Wolf also recommended limiting the number of non-GCSE qualifications that counted towards an individual student's score, in order to 'safeguard pupils' access to a common general core'. The current performance measure of five A*–C grades may include two approved non-GCSE subjects. From 2015/16, when the new 'Progress 8' measure is implemented, three slots out of the eight can be filled by these non-GCSE subjects.¹⁸

The performance tables published in January show that the Wolf reforms have had an impact on the number of young people who are being entered for vocational qualifications between the ages of 14 and 16 (see table 6.1). Looking at BTECs and OCR Nationals, numbers of entries have effectively halved between 2012/13 and 2013/14. It is important that young people are being entered for vocational qualifications because of the additional benefit and breadth that such subjects can provide, rather than because they are seen as any kind of 'easy option'. If the decline in entries reflects the fact that vocational subjects are now consistently seen as an equally challenging subject to an academic GCSE, then such a fall in entries is a positive outcome. It will be important to continue to monitor these figures, however, as it would be worrying if vocational education became an increasingly rare feature in young people's upper-secondary education.

For 16–19-year-olds, Wolf was clear that students should not follow a programme which is entirely 'occupational' and that the study programmes should include at least one qualification of substantial size which offered clear potential for progression either in education or into skilled employment. Since the Wolf review, 'tech levels' have been developed. These are level 3 vocational qualifications which will be included in performance tables from 2016, and are the substantial qualifications which count towards the new technical baccalaureate.

¹⁸ Progress 8 is a measure of a cohort's average progress over eight subjects: English and maths (which are double-weighted), three Ebacc subjects (from the sciences, computer science, geography, history and languages) and three other subjects, which can be other GCSEs or non-GCSE subjects.

Table 6.1

Number of 14–16-year-olds entering vocational qualifications, 2012/13 vs 2013/14

2012/13	level 1	level 2
BTEC Award	6,643	9,930
BTEC Certificate	7,334	415,983
BTEC Diploma	1,972	77,629
OCR National Award	1,410	214,273
OCR National Certificate	8	18,548
Total	17,367	736,363

2013/14		
BTEC Award		47,652
BTEC Certificate	2,733	222,111
BTEC Diploma	732	24,955
OCR National Award		57,784
OCR National Certificate		36,674
OCR National Diploma		363
Total	3,351	389,549

Source: DfE Subject and LA tables, table 14 (DfE E) and table 15 (DfE F)

It was seen as important that tech levels were ‘employer-led’, and so a prerequisite for approval of any tech level is that it is endorsed by a sector body or five employers. Later in this chapter we will consider the different processes by which it has been ensured that tech levels are employer-led, by comparison with the Trailblazer process for apprenticeships.

The Richard review into apprenticeships was another influential report (Richard 2012). In this area, much has changed over the course of this parliament. The focus of this report on education to the age of 19 does not allow space for us to go into significant detail, but there are two themes from the Richard report that have changed the landscape significantly. First, Richard was clear that there should be just one apprenticeship qualification (or ‘standard’, as it has come to be known) for each occupation, and these should be designed and developed by employers themselves. Second, he asserted that employers needed to have ‘purchasing power’ in the apprenticeship system, and so advocated giving employers more direct control over apprenticeships funding.

The following section assesses apprenticeships specifically as they apply to young people in our under-19 age-group of interest.

6.2 Apprenticeships for under-19s

Apprenticeship growth has been impressive under this government, with the Government celebrating 2 million new apprenticeships just before Christmas 2014 (BIS 2014). Nonetheless, there are some trends that continue to be worrying and which are relevant here.

The first is the extent to which apprenticeships are providing an entry into employment for young people. Rather, it seems that apprenticeships are being given to adults as a way to progress within a company: 67 per cent of apprentices have been employed by their employer previously (Winterbotham et al 2014). This runs against the grain of Richard’s recommendation that apprenticeships should be redefined and ‘targeted at those who are new to a job or role’, with training of existing workers delivered separately.

The latest figures also show that the number of young apprentices has been falling. There were 185,800 under 19 apprentices in 2013/14, 10,000 less than in 2002/03 and over 20,000 less than the highest recorded figure of 207,400 under-19 apprentices recorded in 2004/05. Moreover, of the 185,800 under-19 apprentices, 134,500 are on level 2 apprenticeships, while only around 50,000 are on level 3 apprenticeships (BIS A) – that is, at the level which IPPR has previously suggested should be the normal level for work-based learning in order to be badged as an apprenticeship (Dolphin 2014).

On the face of it, there looks to have been a drop, or at best stagnation, in pre-19 apprenticeships. However, the current government would suggest such figures are misleading. That is because it has introduced requirements that all apprenticeships (a) are at least 12 months in duration, and (b) constitute a ‘real job’ – that is, there is the involvement of and employment by a real employer. While numbers are still low, therefore, there has been a strengthening of the requirements for those undertaking apprenticeships.

The government has introduced mechanisms to encourage employers, particularly smaller firms, to take on younger apprenticeships. The apprenticeship grant for employers (AGE), for example, allows firms with fewer than 50 employees and which have not had an apprentice in the last 12 months to apply for a £1,500 grant to employ an apprentice under the age of 25, to a maximum of five grants. However, it is apparent that many employers remain reluctant to take on young apprentices, particularly those within the upper-secondary phase. Many attribute this reluctance to employers’ perceptions that young people do not have the basic skills that older, more experienced individuals are more likely to have (Hasluck and Armitage 2011). Others have suggested that, with so many of this age-group now remaining in full-time education, employers have come to perceive those who do seek employment as being the ‘low achievers’ (Wolf 2011).

The second worrying trend shows up in the woeful levels of pay received by apprentices, which in many cases remain below the already low minimum entitlements. While the apprenticeship wage has been £2.73 per hour, the government announced in the 2015 budget that it will be raised to £3.30 (HMT 2015). There are two crucial issues at play here. One is whether this level of pay is sufficient, particularly if we are insisting (as we recommend below) that an upper-secondary apprenticeship should include less time in the workplace. The second issue is one of enforcement. As we have commented on previously, the government has acknowledged that around a quarter of 16–19-year-old apprentices are not even receiving the low minimum wage to which they are entitled (Evans 2014b). While the government has tried to address this to some extent – through ‘naming and shaming’ campaigns, for instance – enforcement continues to be a huge problem. There is not space to discuss this issue fully in this report, but it is an area that other IPPR research has addressed in more detail (Raikes 2015 forthcoming).

6.3 Work- and education-based vocational education

We know that vocational education is a critical element of any upper-secondary programme. Many countries that perform better than the UK in terms of participation in upper-secondary education, such as the Netherlands or Switzerland, do so precisely because they have a strong vocational education offer (Evans 2014a).

However, as set out in our vision for upper-secondary education, it is also critical to recognise that there is a significant difference between giving young people the practical skills and experience to be able to access and thrive in a flexible labour market and simply training them up for a specific job.

While a lot has been achieved under this current government, our analysis suggests that two broad issues remain:

1. Insufficient thought has been put into differentiation: we believe that there should be more differentiation between those who are 16–19 and those in their 20s, in terms of what is learned and how it is learned.
2. There is a lack of coherence between the college or school-based vocational route and the work-based vocational route during the upper-secondary phase. For instance, both qualifications and apprenticeships have been through redesign and assessment to ensure they are more employer-led, yet these processes have been entirely separate.

While there has been a lot of change in apprenticeships over the course of this parliament, much of it has been universal. So while the government captures data that is split into three age-groups (to count under-19, 19–24 and 25+ apprenticeships), the general approach to apprenticeships applies regardless of age. Apprenticeships have thus become almost a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model and, arguably, the demands on the model are therefore ‘considerable and possibly contradictory’ (Unwin and Fuller 2011). This is despite the Wolf review’s specific recommendation to ask DfE and the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to ‘evaluate the extent to which the current general education components of apprenticeship frameworks are adequate for 16–19-year-old apprentices’ (Wolf 2011), which does not appear to have been given significant attention.

As IPPR has recommended previously (see Dolphin 2014), we believe that apprenticeships should normally be reserved for under-25-year-olds and offered at level 3 or above. That is not to say that offering opportunities to develop skills within a job or to change career are not important, but that these aims should usually be about adult skill development as a distinct part of the education and training landscape (and which is outside the scope of this report).

Here, we seek to take this thinking one step further by focussing specifically on vocational education within the upper-secondary age range and in line with the vision we have set out for this phase.

First, we do not deny that there is an important place for a predominantly work-based learning route within upper-secondary education. Some young people will use their upper-secondary education to embark on a level 3 apprenticeship in order to move into a higher apprenticeship or study at 19, or to use work-based learning at level 2 to progress into a higher-level apprenticeship or further study later on.

It is critical, however, that any young person studying vocational education – whether primarily in a college or work setting – should still be expected to complete the other elements of a broad upper-secondary programme of study. Those countries that have strong apprenticeships as part of their upper-secondary system, such as Switzerland and the Netherlands, also insist that all young people acquire a core of general education. England must do the same.

It also makes sense that for those on a vocational route in upper-secondary education – wherever it is delivered – that there should be a single, particular standard that applies to this age-group. IPPR’s previous report noted this latter point when looking at the successful Dutch model (Evans 2014a). Here, all those young people on the vocational ‘MBO’ route come out with the same final qualification, having met the same standards. This occurs regardless of whether students have been following the school-based training route (BOL), which typically includes four days a week in college and one day with an employer, or the work-based training route (BBL), which provides for four days a week in the workplace and one day in college. The principle of a more coherent pathway is one that we should try to adopt in England.

Recommendation 4: There should be a comparable curriculum and qualifications framework for those studying vocational qualifications in college and those on apprenticeships or predominantly work-based routes.

6.4 What would it take to achieve a more coherent model of upper-secondary vocational education?

Consistency of standards

In recent years two separate processes have been instigated to design and oversee the technical standards that apply to the 16–19 age-group¹⁹. In one area, through the Trailblazers process, a group of employers have designed new standards for apprenticeships. These are generic standards which form the basis of an apprenticeship for a 16- or a 60-year-old. Elsewhere, and at the same time, the process of developing tech levels has required the endorsement of a sector body or group of employers for a new qualification to be counted in performance tables. The principle of involving employers in upper-secondary curriculum design is an important one, but ensuring such involvement and resulting standards are consistent is equally important.

We propose that the Trailblazer process should continue to set the standards for apprenticeships, which now will usually be taken by 19–24-year-olds. However, these employer groups should also be asked to work with the bodies that award tech levels in order to develop separate, consistent upper-secondary vocational standards at level 2 and 3. These could then provide the overarching, guiding standards for vocational subjects in the upper-secondary phase, whether they are studied through a predominantly work-based or college-based route. The standards that are set for this age-group should be clear and consistent on how they will enable progression beyond the age of 19.

Developing this consistent means of involving employers and educationalists in the design of upper-secondary vocational education seems vital. Such a consistent approach works well in countries such as the Netherlands, where the responsibilities of ‘knowledge centres’ (as analysed in our previous report, Evans 2014a) include designing vocational standards, regardless of where they are delivered. Our recommendation is aimed at securing a flexible, interchangeable vocational pathway, like the Dutch model.

Consistency of classroom and workplace time

The Specification for Standards in England (SASE) prescribes that, during an apprenticeship, at least 100 guided learning hours must be spent away from the workplace. How this is structured varies, with some courses providing for a day a week in college, some only half a day a fortnight. There is also no distinction between how much of this time should be spent on general education for students at different ages.

Whether they are following a college- or work-based route, all young people should be entitled to achieve the same broad programme of study as all their other peers. Some elements of the curriculum described above in the previous chapter – such as wider personal development or an extended project – may be able to be completed through time and experience gained in the workplace. We think it is important, however, that young apprentices continue to spend regular time in education, at least a day a week. This is similar to the very successful Swiss model which requires young apprentices to spend 1–2 days a week in school, on occupational-related training and ‘language, communication and society’ (general education) (Turner 2013).

¹⁹ Tech awards for 14-16 year olds have also been developed in partnership with employers, but for this age group there is currently no comparable work-based route or therefore a separate set of standards.

Similarly, and in line with the Dutch model, those on a primarily college-based vocational route should be required to spend one day a week ‘in the field’, applying their knowledge from the overarching curriculum in a workplace setting. There may be an argument for accumulating this time into a block placement, where elements of the overarching curriculum, such as the extended project, could be completed.

Recommendation 5: All those on an apprenticeship or work-based course should be required to spend one or two days in college acquiring the elements of the broader curriculum. Similarly, those on vocational college-based courses should be expected to spend one day a week in the workplace.

Pursuing these changes will bring about a distinctive but coherent vocational offer in the upper-secondary phase. It continues to expect that a young person on a vocational path will be offered, and will meet, the same wider aims as all their peers, thus satisfying our principle of universality in upper-secondary education.

What about those on an academic route?

While we are proposing a wider set of changes to ensure that vocational routes are consistent and allow more time for general education, we would also expect those studying academic subjects to follow a broader programme than many do at present. For instance, according to this approach, it is no longer sufficient to just take three specific A-levels. Alongside their peers who are following a vocational programme of core learning, those studying academic A-levels will also be expected to continue to develop their literacy and numeracy throughout the four-year phase. They should also be delivering an extended project and taking part in wider activities to secure their personal development.

7.

REFORM AT THE BEGINNING: GUIDING THE TRANSITION INTO UPPER-SECONDARY EDUCATION

While the upper-secondary phase starts at the beginning of Year 10, the institutional landscape in England means that, as noted in chapter 4, this is an unusual time for a young person to move from one school to another.

There are currently only 14 colleges in England that offer direct full-time entry to young people at 14. This equates to around 2,000 students aged 14–16 who are in education in colleges full-time. There are also 31,500 young people in this age-range who study at a college part-time. At 17, however, the number attending colleges increases significantly: 181,700 in 2013, or just over 33 per cent of the age cohort (DfE A).

Under the current government a new set of institutions catering exclusively for the upper-secondary phase have been developed. Today there are 30 UTCs in operation, with a further 26 in the pipeline for the next two years.²⁰ There are also 36 studio schools in operation, with a further nine due to open.²¹ So in total there are about 100 new institutions that cater only for the upper-secondary phase which are open or due to open and – assuming an average of 600/300 places in a UTC or studio school respectively – this equates to about 47,100 students. Looking to the near future, there have already been suggestions that, under a future Labour government, there may be a target of establishing at least 100 UTCs by 2020 (Adonis 2014).

UTCs have a clear vision for delivering technical education to this age-group. Each is focussed on a specialism, such as engineering or digital technology, and works closely with employers and local universities. Through start-up funding and their links with employers, UTCs usually have access to the latest equipment and technology. They also work with employers and universities to develop and deliver their curricula. There is clearly an emphasis on technical education, and students spend about 40 per cent of their time on the college's specialism in various ways. Critically, however, UTCs continue to deliver a broad academic as well as technical specialist education. The institutions are small (capacity being about 600 students) and they have long school days.

Studio schools are smaller still, with about 300 students, and have a similarly long working day. Their focus is on delivering the upper-secondary curriculum through a project-based approach and real work. In the final two years of their upper-secondary education, young people are expected to spend about two days a week in work.

IPPR will be carrying out a further, significant research project this year into the effect of the changing institutional landscape, the impact of these new institutions in local areas, and the implications for young people's transitions. We do not wish to pre-empt that deeper analysis here. However, there are some broad initial reflections

20 See <http://www.utcolleges.org/utcs/>

21 See <http://www.studioschoolstrust.org/node/124>

and recommendations we can make about the upper-secondary phase and, particularly, a young person's transition into it.

At present, the general picture is that too many young people have their upper-secondary education disrupted by the fact that many change institution at 16. In some cases this may be inevitable, such as in areas where there are no sixth forms. And for some, a change of scenery and a fresh approach at the halfway point of their child-to-adult transition may provide a welcome new start.

Crucially, we do not yet know much about how successful the UTC or studio school model is. Many of these institutions are very new, with only four UTCs (JCB, Aston, Black Country and Hackney) having key stage 4 results and four (JCB, Aston, Black Country and Bedfordshire) having post-16 results. It would be unfair to draw strong conclusions from such a small sample, but it is fair to say that the story so far is mixed (DfE E).

JCB Academy, the longest-running UTC and one which is now heavily in demand in its area, has had good results, being above average in both key stage 4 and post-16 vocational performance. Others' performance is less encouraging. The Black Country UTC, for example, had only 21 per cent of students achieve five A*–C grades, compared to a national average of 53.4 per cent, and an average point score for those studying level 3 vocational qualifications of 191.9, versus a national average 216.6. Perhaps most disappointingly, one of the four UTCs with key stage 4 results – Hackney UTC – is being forced to close due to poor pupil numbers. More qualitative research, such as via focus groups, has shown that students in UTCs do seem to prefer the 'hands-on' approach to learning, even if they fear that long school days interfere with their social life (Malpass and Limmer 2013).

More research needs to be undertaken into the impact of these new institutions before conclusions can be drawn about the model and any future expansion of it. However, more does need to be done to allow a more open and fair transition at the start of the upper-secondary phase.

Anecdotally, during visits and interviews conducted during research for this report, we have heard many stories of schools being reluctant to let young people move to a new institution for the start of Year 10. We have been told of schools refusing UTCs access to Year 9s and their parents to explain their offer; of UTCs having to invest in huge marketing campaigns or targeting parents at sponsoring employers in order to spread news of their new school; of schools recommending a change of institution only to those students who they are keen to 'offload' for behavioural reasons, with the risk of turning some UTCs or studio schools into 'dumping grounds'. Institutions who are recruiting at 14 are having to compete with this 'guards-up' attitude, which only exacerbates the challenge of having to encourage students to move at an 'unusual' point in their education and to convince them of a concept that is still probably only poorly understood.

Without deeper research into the impact of these new upper-secondary institutions, we do not want to be using this report to make firm recommendations that more of these dedicated upper-secondary institutions should exist or that there should be any mechanisms put in place to actively push young people towards them.

We do recommend, however, that further consideration is given to making the beginning of Year 10 more of an active transition point. Pupils and parents should more consistently be given information in Year 9 about different institutions and methods of learning, and be supported to make the choice about whether a change of institution – usually to embark on a four-year study programme – is the right option for them.

Recommendation 6: During Year 9,²² schools should be required to give students and their parents structured ‘progression’ advice about the expectations of the upper-secondary programme, explaining the pathways and choices that might be open to them over the next four years. Schools should be required to be open about the option to change institution.

Recommendation 7: Schools should be required to give other institutions a means of explaining their alternative offer to students. We propose that where a school falls within another institution’s catchment area then that institution should have access to the school’s Year 9 students. If more than five institutions qualify in this way, then access should be limited to the nearest five institutions so that schools and their young people are not overwhelmed with additional information or choices.

Recommendation 8: In the final term of Year 9, students should be given the explicit choice to confirm that they wish to remain in their current school or to ‘opt out’ and apply for a place at another institution.

Our expectation is that many young people will choose to stay where they are. Nonetheless, if new upper-secondary institutions are going to be given a chance to succeed, and there is going to be an increased sense of upper-secondary as a distinct, coherent phase in an individual’s education, then it is important that Year 10 is seen as a more open transition point. To advance this, chapter 9 explores the potential for local oversight of upper-secondary education, so that where an education commissioner is in place they may be given the power to make a decision about whether and how the second and third requirements work best in their area.

22 As is discussed further in chapter 11, Year 9 is a crucial moment for impartial progression guidance.

8. REFORM AT THE END: SHIFTING THE EMPHASIS ONTO ACHIEVEMENT AT 19 RATHER THAN 16

It is a recurring theme of this report that the coherence of the upper-secondary phase is undermined by fragmentation or systemic overemphasis at the halfway point, at age 16. This faultline runs through many parts of the system, from funding to the institutional landscape. Of course, some of these schisms would be almost impossible to repair: it is just a fact, for example, that a lot of England's secondary provision stops at age 16 and that many young people move on to college or other institutions at this point. This is not in itself a bad thing, nor would it be wise or practical to suggest that all young people should stay in one institution for the whole period, given the massive reorganisation that this would entail.

Nonetheless, the system as it stands does reinforce a perception of 16–19 education as an add-on to the upper-secondary phase, rather than its crucial culmination and endpoint. In our research, we have considered how the mechanisms of accountability might be used to shift the focal point of institutions, and of the system as a whole, on to where young people get to at age 18 or 19, when they complete their upper-secondary education, and to reduce the emphasis on achievement at the arbitrary midpoint that currently exists.

Again, this is something that IPPR made a case for 15 years ago, with the 1990 'British baccalaureate' report concluding that:

'In countries where participation to 18 is the norm, an exam like GCSE is redundant ... This is not to argue that there should be no assessment at 16: rather that it should be designed to perform a useful and positive role, for instance guiding student choice in post-16 education.'

Finegold et al 1990

The time is not right for another round of reform to GCSEs, nor to be attempting to force a change in the 'normal' pattern of study and achievement. We still expect that the majority of young people will spend two years acquiring a broad level 2 education before embarking on a more specialised and stretching level 3 programme, complemented by the other aspects of a universal, broader programme of study.

As participation to 18 becomes the statutorily enforced norm, however, we think there is a lot to be said for trying to focus accountability on the end of the upper-secondary phase. We know that changes to accountability change behaviour – we have already seen, for example, how the introduction of the Ebacc and reduced counting of non-GCSE subjects in performance tables has changed schools' behaviours. It would be dangerous, clearly, to continue tweaking accountability as a principal means of changing institutional behavior, like a puppeteer pulling the strings. So the proposals set out in this chapter seek to balance increasing transparency and a focus on the whole of upper-secondary phase with some measure of continuity, that is, to shift the point of emphasis without rushing into new, hard accountability measures and the accompanying risk of unintended consequences.

Given the large proportion of 17-year-olds (43.6 per cent) who currently attend either FE or sixth form colleges (DfE A), we know that a significant number of other institutions either do not cater for over-16s or, at least, are losing significant chunks of their cohorts at this point. Therefore it is only right that, in the short term at least, there remains some form of accountability at 16.

The new secondary accountability system proposed by the government is very sensible.²³ Rather than driving institutions to focus on getting young people over an arbitrary C/D threshold in five GCSE subjects, it may well help to make the age-16 milestone more of a 'progress check'. We are therefore supportive of the plan to use the 'Progress 8'²⁴ measure as the floor standard against which institutions are held to account. Such a measure should reflect on the extent that an institution has helped their students to progress over a broad range of subjects, ready to enter their final two or three years of upper-secondary education.

The government is also proposing that institutions be required to publish the following additional headline measures on their cohort's performance so that institutional performance can be compared on:

- **Attainment 8:** pupils' average absolute achievement in the same suite of subjects as the Progress 8 measure
- **English and mathematics:** the percentage of pupils achieving a C grade or better in both English (either language or literature) and mathematics
- **EBacc:** the percentage of pupils achieving good grades across a range of academic subjects (further information about this measure is below).

We recommend retaining the first two of these, as useful measures: the first because an average attainment measure may well be interesting and accessible to parents, in combination with the available information on progress; the second in order to recognise English and mathematics as vital, core basics which should be a central plank of the whole upper-secondary phase, and in which significant progress should be made in these early years of the phase.

Focus on achieving level 2 English and mathematics early on in upper-secondary education should not preclude the expectation that further progress will be made in later years. During research for this report, we have been told anecdotally of frustration among post-16 institutions at schools 'simply passing [on] the burden of ensuring a young person succeeds in English and maths'. The English and mathematics headline measure should ensure that institutions are held to account if they are failing in this way. Also, the importance of English and mathematics is further recognised by their double-weighting in the Progress 8 measure.

In addition to these measures which continue a focus on 16, we propose that the accountability framework must take a longer view and incorporate data on institutional and cohort performance beyond this point, with increased focus on where young people end up at the end of, and following, their upper-secondary education.

Recommendation 9: Further sophisticated data should be collected and made openly available to show how cohorts of young people are progressing over the entirety of their upper-secondary education – where they move to during the phase, what they are achieving in these different institutions and where they end up in the year or two after completing upper-secondary education.

23 The intention is to move to this new system in 2015/16 with new performance tables being published based on 2016 results (DfE 2013).

24 Progress 8 is a measure of a cohort's average progress over English and maths (which are double-weighted), three slots for Ebacc subjects (the sciences, computer science, geography, history and languages) and three open slots, which can be filled by non-GCSE subjects.

In essence, this would continue to give a complete picture of attainment, progress and destination, as the new 16–19 accountability system does now, but crucially it would track individuals and cohorts over the whole upper-secondary period. Such data could be aggregated for the public's benefit, so that it showed a picture of institutional contribution rather than individual pupil achievement. But making granular data available to institutions concerning their own pupils and to those with oversight of institutions would also be useful.

In developing this recommendation, we did consider making a cohort's progress, destination and attainment at the end of the upper-secondary phase a hard accountability measure for all institutions, regardless of whether the cohort remained in the same institution for the whole of the four-year period or moved on at 16. This accountability lever might have positive outcomes, in terms of encouraging institutions to think about upper-secondary education as a four-year phase and incentivizing increased collaboration. We were concerned, however, that such a strong, new measure would be unfair and could lead to unintended consequences, such as institutions holding on to young people in Year 12 and 13 in order to 'control outcomes' even if this was not the best option for the individuals concerned.

Therefore, collecting and publishing more sophisticated data, rather than setting a hard measure at this stage, should both provide valuable new information and encourage thinking about the four-year phase as a whole. Rather than relying on hearsay, for instance, about how much an institution has contributed to a cohort's or individual's success or failure, better data would be available to analyse patterns of contribution in a local area. As education commissioners come into place (as we propose in the next chapter), this data could then allow them to make more sophisticated judgments about the performance of institutions and the effectiveness of transitions and pathways between, through and out of institutions, and to make commissioning and intervention decisions accordingly.

In the longer term, it may be that such data becomes sufficiently sophisticated that a rich set of performance data is published about any one cohort only once they reach the end of upper-secondary education.²⁵ This data could show the destination of a young person and the performance and progress which was attributable to a given institution, whether that means the final achievement and progress at 18 for a cohort which had stayed within an institution, or the progress of any cohort which left at 16 (with access to information about what they had achieved since). While improving data and tracking might look like an incremental step, over time this approach could help to entrench a change in focus from assessment at 16 to achievement at the end of the upper-secondary phase.

Changes to the accountability framework alone are not sufficient to patch up the incoherent and often competitive upper-secondary system. Nonetheless, the changes set out in this chapter might start to nudge a change in thinking towards a four-year upper-secondary system in line with our vision, a change in thinking that could be reinforced by making the other changes suggested in this report.

25 Institutions would, of course, still be free to publish information about performance at different age points but this would no longer be about 'hard accountability'.

9.

ENSURING LOCAL STRUCTURES SUPPORT STRONGER UPPER-SECONDARY EDUCATION

In order to have a truly effective upper-secondary system, the right overarching structures need to be in place. The upper-secondary system is a complex one – there are many actors, and there are national, local and sectoral interests to balance. Experience shows that there is unlikely ever to be a perfect institutional structure. Rather, various studies have shown that, particularly for successful subnational structures, what is critical is a stable foundation which allows local leadership and institutional relationships to flourish (OECD 2012).

9.1 Principles for devolution in upper-secondary education

This chapter sketches the outline of a regional structure capable of underpinning a more effective, coherent and locally driven upper-secondary system, based on the following principles.

- **Where possible we should be aiming for as much to be devolved to a local level as possible.** As set out in previous work by IPPR, there is a strong case for the benefits of decentralisation (Cox et al 2014). Fundamental here is the case made previously for a greater focus on the ‘relational state’ approach (Muir and Parker 2014), which argues that the only way to solve complex public service problems – of which improving upper-secondary problem is one – is to have a clear national vision or entitlement (as we seek to provide in this report) out of which flows devolution of power and funding to local areas. This model allows tailored, innovative approaches to emerge to solve this and other complex public service issues.
- **Devolution can, and should, happen incrementally, at different paces and to different extents.** We believe that the propositions in this chapter for local oversight, responsibility and flexibility are preferable to a centralised model. But it is important not to impose this on areas that are not yet willing or ready, nor to wait for the slowest areas to be ready before pushing ahead with devolution to others. Areas that want this extra level of responsibility need to demonstrate local buy-in and capability. It is also critical that what is set out in this chapter is a permissive framework, with the freedom for local areas to negotiate the terms of any devolution deal and to tailor local delivery within the bounds of a national framework (discussed further below). For further discussion of this kind of phased or variegated devolution, see Cox et al 2014.
- **Where possible devolution should build on existing structures.** This is preferable to another round of nationwide bureaucratic dismantling and recreation. As Lord Adonis put it in his growth review, ‘the principle of reform should be evolution not revolution’ (Adonis 2014). Inevitably there is variation in the current performance of local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) (see Broadbridge and Raikes 2015), but the first instinct should be to clarify and strengthen these local functions rather than starting again.

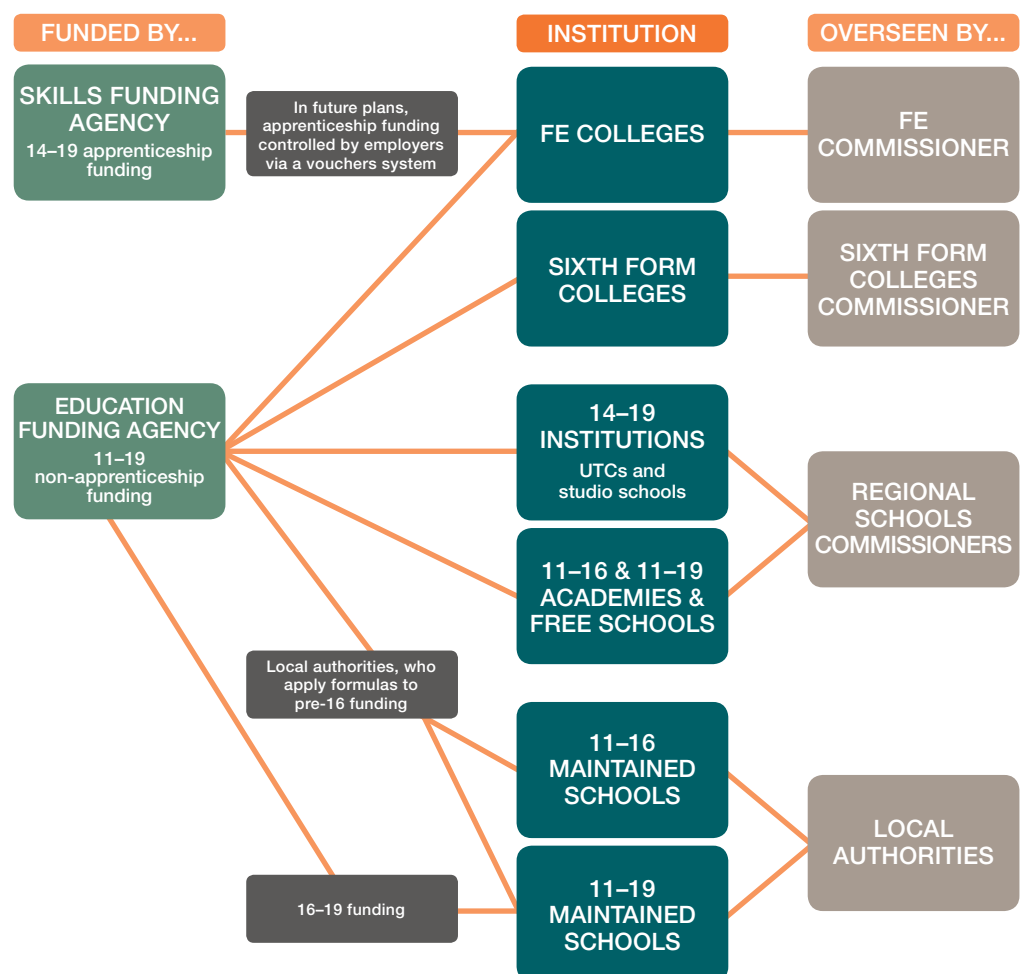
This chapter makes three key proposals:

- Building on IPPR’s previous proposals for school commissioners (see Muir 2014), we propose that **education commissioners** should be developed at a combined-authority level with oversight of all upper-secondary provision in an area.
- Where greater coordination is needed between employers and educational institutions then **brokering and support should be offered by the LEP**, working with education commissioners.
- Expanding on some of the existing specific city and regional deals, **budgets for upper-secondary provision should also be devolved** to those subnational regions that wish to take on this responsibility and can demonstrate the capability to handle it. Such devolution should occur within limits, however, with all regions being guided by the national vision and curriculum set out by the government and with minimum per-pupil funding maintained across the 14–19 phase.

9.2 Institutional diversity and oversight by education commissioners

As figure 9.1 illustrates, the oversight and funding streams of 14–19 institutions in England is highly varied.

Figure 9.1
The confusing landscape of local upper-secondary education



With regard to academies and free schools, the growth under this government has been exponential. Today, there are more than 4,200 academies and over 250 free schools in operation (DfE G), as well as 37 studio schools and 30 UTCs, with more in the pipeline. The government has come under criticism for the apparent contradiction in introducing these institutions under the banner of autonomy but, at the same time, appearing to pursue 'galloping centralism' by repatriating power and oversight from local areas (see Coffield and Williamson 2011). It was against this backdrop that many academics started to talk about the need for some kind of 'middle tier', potentially in the form of school commissioners (Hill 2012).

From September 2014, the government has introduced eight regional schools commissioners to oversee academies and free schools, approving new provision and tackling underperformance, in their area. Critically, these regional schools commissioners do not have any oversight of the remaining maintained schools in their area, and cover wide regions which do not match up with other regional boundaries. Academies and free schools are funded by the Education Funding Agency (EFA), albeit subject to funding levels set by their local authority through the schools forum process.

With academies now comprising around 60 per cent of secondary schools, there still remains, in most areas and to varying degrees, a significant number of maintained schools, catering for the upper-secondary phase (DfE H). These schools continue to be overseen and funded directly by the local authority for their 14–16 provision, with funding coming directly from the central Education Funding Agency – and subject to a different, centrally set formula – for any post-16 provision.

In addition to the already confusing landscape of schools in a local area, upper-secondary provision is commonly offered by FE colleges and sixth form colleges. As we have noted already, only 14 FE colleges currently offer direct entry at 14, but many 16–19-year-olds study in sixth form or FE colleges (43 per cent of 17-year-olds for instance). The governance arrangements for these institutions are different again. Colleges receive their funding from two central sources – the EFA for pre-19 and the Skills Funding Agency for post-19 and apprenticeship funding. Oversight for FE provision resides at the national level, by a single national FE commissioner, and for sixth form colleges via another dedicated commissioner.

The difficulties posed by multiple commissioners and funding agencies are plain to see. Decisions about new provision, changes in age-range, changes in provider or closure of institutions are all being taken by different people depending on the type of institution involved. This makes it very difficult to ensure that there are sufficient high-quality places, that there is no excess of places (which incentivises institutions selfishly to hold on to pupils), or that there is any local shaping of provision.

As set by IPPR previously in our report on, *Whole system reform* (Muir 2014), we believe it is right that diversity in provision is encouraged, that the freedoms that individual institutions have been given are maintained, and that local authorities should continue to develop their strategic roles around planning of places and admissions. However, as combined authorities continue to spread and mature, we believe that they should be given the opportunity to appoint an education commissioner to oversee provision in their area. And, by the very premise of this report, which argues for more coherence, we would also suggest that such a commissioner should have powers over all upper-secondary provision in an area, regardless of institution type.

Recommendation 10: Combined authority-sized regions should be given the power to appoint an education commissioner to oversee all upper-secondary provision in an area.

In summary, these education commissioners would have the following responsibilities and powers:

- where there is a need for more places in an area, to run competitions for new providers, based on clear national guidance to ensure fairness
- to administer a change of provider or broker collaboration where a school consistently fails to meet set standards or expectations, and to intervene where FE institutions are failing to provide for this age-group
- to renew the funding agreements of existing academies once they end
- to wield the power to force institutions to expand to meet local demand
- to decommission schools or FE provision for this age-group where they become no longer viable
- in future, to commission 16–18 provision across their area, in partnership with local authorities, colleges and LEPs
- to broker collaboration across the region to secure improvement or bring coherence, for example, to smooth the transition for young people who move institution in the middle of the upper-secondary phase
- to track performance and gather local intelligence, in order to identify and challenge institutions that need to improve
- to report on performance to central government and to local authority scrutiny boards.

Education commissioners should be the ‘glue’ in collaborative efforts in their area. In their commissioning and intervention role they should be looking at the new data proposed in chapter 8 to inform their decision-making and to identify where transitions are not working well and thus where collaboration may need to be improved. As proposed in chapter 7, education commissioners could also play a part in promoting or enforcing a more open transition at 14, as students move into the upper-secondary phase of their education.

9.3 Employer engagement and the local dimension

As we have made clear already, upper-secondary education should not be narrowly about training a young person for a specific job or role, but should be about providing them with the broad education and experience to access, progress through and move flexibly within the labour market for years to come.

This principle, however, should not be taken to exclude employers from or inhibit their involvement in this phase of education – or, indeed, to enable their non-involvement. The difficulty is that, unlike investment in a 20-year-old apprentice or specific training for an adult employee, the benefits of engaging with upper-secondary education are less immediate and tangible for an employer. Nonetheless, such engagement is important (see Evans 2014a).²⁶

Recommendation 11: Employers should be given a consistent role in curriculum design at a national level. At a local level, LEPs should be given a clearer role in coordinating collaboration between upper-secondary education provision and employers.

At a national level, it is important that employers are involved in curriculum design, to ensure that those studying vocational subjects are consistently acquiring qualifications, knowledge and skills that allow them to access and progress in relevant sectors (as discussed in detail in chapter 6). However, while young people across England should be expected to demonstrate the same end standards, national frameworks should nevertheless allow some flexibility for employers and

²⁶ For IPPR’s previous work on the benefits and practicalities of employer engagement more widely, see Lanning 2012.

educational institutions to work at a local level to tailor teaching and the detail of the curriculum to the local context.

Employers often bemoan the literacy and numeracy skills of young people leaving upper-secondary education. That is one reason why it is so important that literacy and numeracy runs throughout the entire four year upper-secondary curriculum (as advocated in the previous chapter), both to ensure better minimum and average standards, but also to stretch those who would have previously stopped studying these subjects at 16. But it is also important that more research is carried out to understand exactly what really constitutes having the 'literacy and numeracy skills to thrive in adult life', and whether new methods of assessment are required.²⁷ Employers can play an important role in answering these questions.

At a local level, enabling and supporting employers and educational institutions to work effectively together is equally critical. We envisage a number of ways in which employers can and should be involved in the upper-secondary education system:

- A young person studying a vocational subject will, in line with our recommendations in chapter 6, require workplace-based learning. This will vary in size depending on whether they are on a predominantly work-based or college-based route. If all those studying vocational subjects as part of core learning are going to secure good, relevant experience of the workplace, then it is likely that employers will have to increasingly be prepared to play a role in upper-secondary education by offering such placements. As discussed further below, the LEP may have to act as a strong intermediary to broker such arrangements between employers and education institutions.
- Beyond this, employers should be involved in the learning experience of all young people, not just those on vocational tracks. Some of this is about careers education and ensuring young people are exposed to the opportunities and pathways available to them.²⁸ But it is also about ensuring young people gain regular and genuine experience and understanding of 'the world of work'. Evidence shows that employers value work experience, so giving more young people access to proper experience of employment, or at least exposure to the workplace, is important (Gerfin et al 2005).

Many educational institutions have already built up good links with employers, and vice versa, with and without the help of intermediary institutions. In the course of our research, we saw many examples of good practice, including employers who are offering exciting, meaningful work experience (as per the principles laid out in CIPD 2012) or working together to pursue initiatives like the Employability Chartermark developed by the West Country LEP.

In line with the principles set out at the beginning of this chapter, we also accept that there is unlikely to be a perfect, one-size-fits-all solution to supporting collaboration between education institutions and business at a local level, but that building on existing structures probably gives us the best chance of making progress.

Many reviews – including the separate growth reviews of Lord Heseltine (2012) and Lord Adonis (2014), as well as previous IPPR reports (see Broadbridge and Raikes 2015) – have proposed that we must not abandon but continue to perfect the government's LEP model. In step with these earlier reports, we agree that a future government should (a) give LEPs further opportunities to define their geographical boundaries so that they better match up with evolving governance regions and (b) give LEPs a clearer sense of their responsibilities and sufficient funding to deliver on them.

²⁷ See chapter 11 for further discussion around this question.

²⁸ See chapter 11 for some reflections on the issue of careers education, which otherwise sits outside the scope of this report.

As part of this clarification and support for their role, we propose that LEPs should be given responsibility and further funding where available (see further below) to take on the role of coordinating local education institutions and employers. They could work with individual organisations and the education commissioner to secure things like more apprenticeships (see Raikes 2015, a forthcoming IPPR on local governance of apprenticeships, for further detailed thinking in some of these areas), work placements, and a greater bank of careers information. Some LEPs are clearly already doing this better than others, and it will be important to continue to identify and share good practice.

9.4 Devolution of funding

We have already seen some devolution of adult skills funding under recent 'deals'. We propose that devolution of upper-secondary funding should follow – although, crucially, that should happen within a tighter national framework than exists for post-19 funding.

Case study: devolution in Greater Manchester

Greater Manchester's devolution deal, which was announced in November 2014, seemed to get past the 'double-speak of devolution' (Hodgson and Spours 2012) that has plagued attempts to rebalance power in the past, with an apparently meaningful package of devolved powers and responsibilities being proposed.

In respect of skills, Greater Manchester has been offered the chance to work with government to 'reshape and restructure' its FE provision into a 'new, forward-looking FE system in 2017'. It does not explicitly confirm in the deal that this is talking about post-19 FE provision only, although that certainly seems to be the assumption on the ground. The devolution agreement also only specifies being able to shape the pricing of adult skills courses, but is silent on upper-secondary courses, and our assumption is that any freedom to reshape upper-secondary provision or courses falls outside the scope of the current deal (HMT and GMCA 2014). One area where Greater Manchester does seem to have been given some greater flexibility over younger provision is in being promised responsibility for allocating the apprenticeship grant for employers (AGE) (see discussion of apprenticeships in chapter 6). We are seeing similar proposals for devolving AGE and giving local areas more power to shape FE provision emerging in other places, such as Sheffield and Greater London (HMT 2015).

Greater Manchester is clearly in the early stages of thinking about how it might redesign its adult skills system to meet economic priorities. This report recommends that any future government commits to pursuing further devolution of education funding and responsibilities for combined authorities like Greater Manchester if they show the appetite, vision and capacity to take on that responsibility.

As explored below, it may be the case that any devolution of pre-19 funding must inevitably operate within tighter limits than adult skills funding. Adult skills funding is all about encouraging regional variation and tailoring a region's offer according to economic priorities and specific job needs. In comparison, upper-secondary education necessarily requires a national framework and set of controls to ensure that all young people are being offered similarly stretching and resourced programmes across the country.

The first section of this chapter suggested that as combined authorities or similar regions were ready they could request to appoint an education commissioner to oversee upper-secondary provision.

Recommendation 12: Where an education commissioner had been appointed and wider local governance is in place we propose that – similar to the current devolution process – a combined authority should be able to ask for devolution of the relevant upper-secondary funding and associated powers.

This would include all of the region's dedicated schools grant allocation (including that portion which is currently recouped back and then transferred from the EFA directly to academies), the aggregate total of 16–19 funding based on pupil numbers in their region, relevant capital funding, and grants like the AGE, if such a pot of money continues to exist (see Raikes 2015 forthcoming).

The combined authority would be able to use this devolved budget to shape the institutional mix in their area – for example, by funding places or expanding particular institutions – in conversation with local authorities and education commissioners, given their place-planning and commissioning roles. In order to ensure equity in the provision offer across the country, we would still propose that local areas should be required to stick to a national minimum per-pupil rate, with some flexibility for local areas to also decide to give additional funding to certain groups of pupils or to invest in certain types of support that might enhance the broad offer in an area – to invest, for instance, in a collaborative programme on mathematics, to invest in better funding for post-16 transport where that would be beneficial or a local work experience programme coordinated by the LEP.

We believe this series of steps could strengthen the delivery of upper-secondary education at a local level, guided by a national vision. As set out above, devolution only works where it is not universally imposed but is chosen by regions as and when they can demonstrate their readiness. It is unlikely that you would therefore effect a transformation across the country along the lines suggested. But it would be very interesting and encouraging to see some leading, innovative authorities testing ways and means of making their local upper-secondary offer more meaningful.

10. MAKING FUNDING FAIRER

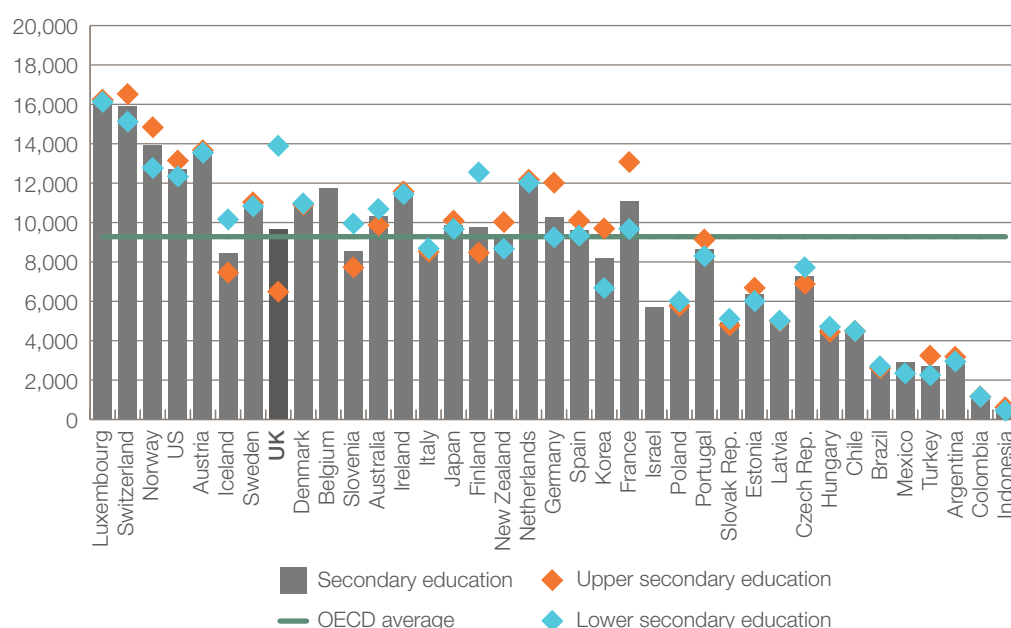
One of the most striking inconsistencies in upper-secondary education in England is in the distribution of public funding. Overall education spending in England has continued to increase over recent years. Public expenditure on education, as a percentage of total public expenditure, increased by about 10 per cent in the UK between 2008 and 2011 – this is the fourth-largest increase among OECD countries, and runs contrary to the trend in many OECD countries where education spend was cut as the financial crisis began to bite (OECD 2014b).

Looking comparatively at secondary education spending in isolation, however, the story is different. The UK spends an average of US\$9,649 per pupil in secondary education, just above the OECD average of \$9,280 (OECD 2014a). However, as figure 10.1 shows, the vast majority of countries spend more on ‘upper-secondary education’ than ‘lower secondary education’, or a similar amount on both. The UK on the other hand spends significantly *less* than the average per-pupil amount on upper-secondary education, but much more on its lower secondary education. It is in the minority of countries which spend more on lower- than upper-secondary education, and the size of this disparity is wider in the UK than in any other OECD country. One reason for this might be the significant narrowing (compared with other countries) of the curriculum that occurs in England as young people turn 16 and move into the ‘second half’ of their secondary education.

Figure 10.1

UK's lower-secondary spend is much higher than the OECD average while its upper-secondary spend is much lower

Annual expenditure per student by educational institutions for all services, by level of education (2011) [equivalent US\$ converted using PPPs, based on FTEs]



Source: OECD 'Annual expenditure per student by educational institutions for all services, by level of education (2011)' (OECD 2014a)

Across upper-secondary education in England, the funding story is one of great inconsistency. Funding for the second half of the upper-secondary phase (that is, for 16–18-year-olds) has been continuously dropping compared to the funding for 14 and 15-year-olds. As with all of our recommendations in this report, we believe that greater thought should be given to how funding arrangements can bring coherence to the whole upper-secondary phase and support a strong, shared vision for universal, broad and stretching provision.

10.1 The impact of ringfencing the 5–15 budget

In 2010 the Coalition government decided to ringfence the schools budget, protecting it from the funding cuts that affected many other service areas and departments. However, crucially, this decision protected funding for 5–15-year-olds only; the budget for post-16 education was left unprotected. As a necessary consequence, the limited ringfencing of the 5–15 budget has resulted in severe cuts in education areas which fall outside of that age-range. As table 10.1 shows, while the 5–15 budget has seen a steady increase in its baseline amount, the 16–18 budget has fallen steadily over the same period. In nominal terms, this is equivalent to a fall of about 9 per cent in the 16–18 budget – or £700 million – through to the end of 2014/15 (according to planned and forecast expenditure).

Table 10.1

Spending on education by age-group, 2010/11–2015/16 (nominal, £bn)

	2010/11 outturn	2011/12 outturn	2012/13 outturn	2013/14 plan*	2014/15 plan	2015/16 forecast**
5–15 budget	36.3	37.1	37.9	39.9	41.2	41.8
16–18 budget	7.7	7.6	7.1	7.3	7.0	6.9

Source: IPPR analysis based on AoC 2014: table 4

* 5–15 is based on outturn; 16–18 is based on AoC calculations using planned per-pupil allocations from the EFA funding letter.

** 5–15 forecast is based on an uprating of the 2014/15 plan in line with the GDP deflator at market prices (HMT 2015: table C.2); 16–18 forecast is based on a reduction in the 2014/15 plan derived from estimates by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Emmerson et al 2014) for the average fall in all non-ringfenced budgets for the current parliament.

Our own analysis suggests that this settlement will have led to a fairly healthy increase in the average per-pupil rate for 5–15-year-olds of about £500 over the past five years. This budget is not immune from being squeezed in other ways, but certainly the picture has been friendlier for this group than it has in the post-16 range.

Table 10.2

Spending per pupil in the 5–15 age-group, 2010/11–2015/16 (nominal, £)

	2010/11 outturn	2011/12 outturn	2012/13 outturn	2013/14 outturn	2014/15 plan	2015/16 forecast
	5,239	5,334	5,410	5,642	5,768	5,782

Note: Figures are converted from table 10.1 to a per-pupil basis using DfE projections and outturns (DfE I: table 1).

The complexities and opacity of post-16 funding data makes it hard to derive a similarly specific or reliable average per-pupil figure for 16–18-year-olds, which has been a source of frustration in trying to deliver accurate analysis for this report. We know that the flat per-pupil rate for a 16- or 17-year-old on a full-

time programme is £4,000 (before any other weightings), and we have seen other estimates of institutions receiving, for example, around £4,645 per pupil in 2013 (ASCL et al 2013) or around £4,304 in 2012/13 (SFCA 2015). In the absence of comparable data about the overall 16–18 budget and the shape of the 16–18 population, therefore, it is impossible for us to determine with the same degree of accuracy the amount of the per-pupil rate or how it has and will change over time.

Using the estimates given by other organisations above, however, and what we know about 5–15 per-pupil rates, it is very likely that pupils receive about 20 per cent less funding once they enter the post-16 education.²⁹ This cut becomes more severe if a student reaches their 18th birthday and remains in upper-secondary education for a fifth year – which describes about 20 per cent of post-16 students (RCU 2013). Here, the government has cut funding for a full-time 18-year-old student to a base rate of £3,300, 17 per cent less than is allocated to a 16- or 17-year-old.

Figure 10.1 above shows that other countries treat all stages of secondary education much more evenly when it comes to funding, so schools and institutions are very unlikely to experience such a significant drop-off in funding halfway through the upper-secondary phase. Indeed, private schools in England actually *increase* their fees as a young person enters the second half of upper-secondary education, by an average of 4.8 per cent (ISC 2014).³⁰

10.2 Modelling the impact of political choices about education funding

Following recent policy announcements by the UK’s three major parties, we now have two different scenarios for education spending to consider in closer detail.

The Conservatives have announced that they will protect, in flat cash terms, the per-pupil funding for 5–15-year-olds as at the end of 2015/16, but will continue to leave the budgets for 16–18-year-olds and early-years provision³¹ unprotected. This differs from the current settlement in that this proposal removes the inflation-linked protection for the aggregate 5–15 budget.

A contrary proposal has been put forward by both Labour and the Liberal Democrats, separately, who have proposed that their parties would each protect the whole education budget in real terms – that is, including inflation-linked protection.

Whole of budget impact

Our analysis shows the impact of each of these two scenarios on the 5–15 and 16–18 budgets, both in nominal terms (table 10.3) and real terms (table 10.4).

29 This may be a conservative estimate, given that the 5–15 rate covers both primary and secondary funding but funding for lower-secondary education is on average fairly significantly higher than it is for primary education (DfE J). That is, this calculation assumes a constant rate of per-pupil funding across the 5–15 age-range, where in reality the cliff-edge at 15/16 is probably more drastic.

30 The average term fee for a day pupil in an independent sixth form is £4,683, which is 3.9 per cent higher than in 2013 and 4.8 per cent higher than the average of £4,669 that is charged for a senior student.

31 Early-years provision and funding is not covered in this paper, but is clearly relevant to a more detailed, systemic analysis.

Table 10.3

Total budget implications of party proposals for funding protections, 2015/16–2019/20 (nominal, £bn)

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Conservative 5–15 (flat cash per pupil)	41.8	42.2	42.9	43.6	44.3
Labour/Lib-Dem 5–15 (GDP deflator)	41.8	42.3	43.0	43.9	45.0
Conservative 16–18 (no protection)	6.9	6.7	6.4	6.1	6.5
Labour/Lib-Dem 16–18 (GDP deflator)	6.9	7.0	7.1	7.3	7.5

Notes: 2015/2016 forecasts are calculated as per table 10.1. Implications of the Conservative 5–15 aggregate spending plans are based on our estimate of per-pupil costs in 2015/16 (£5,782) multiplied by the expected number of pupils in a given year. To estimate the implied Conservative spending on 16–18, we adjust the OBR's latest projections of RDEL to reflect plans to pay for some fiscal tightening through welfare cuts and reduced tax avoidance. We calculate the implied annual change in non-ringfenced RDEL and apply that change to the aggregate 16–18 budget. Implications of the Labour and Liberal Democrats' 5–15 and 16–18 aggregate spending plans are based on uprating the 2015/16 baseline with the GDP deflator at market prices (HMT 2015).

Table 10.4

Total budget implications of party proposals for funding protections, 2015/16–2019/20 (2015/16 prices, £bn)

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Conservative 5–15 (flat cash per pupil)	41.8	41.7	41.7	41.5	41.1
Labour/Lib-Dem 5–15 (GDP deflator)	41.8	41.8	41.8	41.8	41.8
Conservative 16–18 (no protection)	6.9	6.6	6.3	5.9	6.0
Labour/Lib-Dem 16–18 (GDP deflator)	6.9	6.9	6.9	6.9	6.9

Notes: Figures have been converted from table 10.3 into 2015/16 prices using our index derived from the GDP deflator at market prices (HMT 2015).

In summary:

- Under the Conservative plan, the total 5–15 budget is likely to be forced to increase in nominal terms (table 10.3), as pupil numbers are predicted to rise. The figures for Conservative plans in table 10.3 are likely to slightly underestimate this impact, given that the increase in pupil numbers is predicted to be greatest at secondary age, where the per-pupil rate (pre-16) is usually higher than it is for primary age-groups.
- In real terms, the impact of the two proposals is likely to be fairly similar for the 5–15 age-group. Having protected the budget in real terms, the Labour and Lib-Dem proposal is likely to see a 5–15 budget that remains flat. Under the Conservatives, the overall budget will fall slightly, however, as increasing pupil numbers will not offset the impact of inflation, given that funding is not protected in real terms in this scenario.
- In nominal terms, there is a difference of around 1.5 percentage points between the effect on aggregate 5–15 funding under the two proposals, with an increase of 6.1 per cent under the Conservative plan and 7.7 per cent under the Labour and Lib-Dem plan.

- However, the impact on the 16–18 budget is significant. In nominal terms, the Conservative plan would see a *decrease* in the 16–18 budget of 6.7 per cent, compared with a 7.7 per cent *increase* under the Labour and Lib-Dem plan.
- In real terms, of course, Labour and the Liberal Democrats would freeze the 16–18 budget. This is a significantly better outcome for institutions catering for this age-range, compared with a predicted real-terms cut of 13.4 per cent under Conservative plans.

Per-pupil spending impact

Looking at per-pupil figures for 5–15 year olds provides a similar outcome, with the actual difference between the two scenarios in real terms likely to be fairly negligible.

Table 10.5

Per-pupil implications of party proposals for funding protections, 5–15 age-group, 2015/16–2019/20 (2015/16 prices, £bn)

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Conservative (flat cash per pupil)	5,782	5,714	5,624	5,508	5,368
Labour/Lib-Dem (GDP deflator)	5,782	5,706	5,612	5,525	5,435

Note: Figures have been converted from table 10.3 to a per-pupil basis using DfE projections (DfE I: table 1).

According to this analysis, there is likely to be a slight and similar real-terms cut under either plan, of 6.0 per cent (Labour/Lib-Dem) or 7.2 per cent (Conservative) per 5–15 pupil. Under the Labour and Lib-Dem plan, this fall can be explained by the fact that their protection is applied to the aggregate budget, which will therefore be stretched increasingly by increasing pupil numbers. Under the Conservative plan, the real-terms fall occurs because their protection is applied to the flat rate at the end of 2015/16, so inflation is likely to eat into that per-pupil figure in the following years.

Table 10.6

Cumulative change per-pupil (real-terms), excluding policy costs, of party proposals for funding protections, 5–15 age-group, 2015/16–2019/20 (% change)

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Conservative (flat cash per pupil)	0	-1.2	-2.7	-4.7	-7.2
Labour/Lib-Dem (GDP deflator)	0	-1.3	-2.9	-4.4	-6.0

Note: Figures are based on the 5–15 spending in table 10.3, converted to a per-pupil basis using DfE projections (DfE I: table 1).

Others have also already acknowledged the additional pressures that changes to national insurance and teachers' pensions are likely to have on institutions' overall budgets for this age-range, and subsequently on the per-pupil funding available (AoC 2014). We have taken the estimated costs of these policy changes from the AoC's report and applied them to aggregate spending on 5–15-year-olds to estimate the cumulative real-terms fall in per-pupil spending under these additional cost pressures. We estimate that the cumulative impact would be about 7.6 per cent under the Labour and Lib-Dem plans to protect the whole education budget in

real terms, or 9.1 per cent under the Conservative plans to protect this age-group only on a flat cash per pupil basis.³²

Table 10.7

Cumulative change per-pupil(real-terms), including policy costs, of party proposals for funding protections, 5–15 age-group, 2015/16–2019/20 (% change)

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Conservative (flat cash per pupil)	0	-3.2	-4.8	-6.7	-9.1
Labour/Lib-Dem (GDP deflator)	0	-3.0	-4.6	-6.1	-7.6

Notes: Figures are based on 5–15 spending in table 10.5, and account for the implied additional costs of changes to teacher pensions and employee national insurance contributions as estimated by the AoC (2014).

10.3 A picture of uncertainty and inconsistency in future funding

This analysis shows that a future funding settlement is likely to fall quite hard on those catering for 5–15 year olds, regardless of which policy package is adopted. However, the impact for 16–18-year-olds is likely to be significantly worse under a government adopting the Conservative-proposal. Given the difficulties already outlined in seeking to unpick the 16–18-year-old budget, it is difficult to predict exactly how the predicted reduction in this budget of 13.4 per cent (in real terms) would play out in terms of a per-pupil rate. But certainly it is likely to be a further significant cut to an already disproportionately low figure. And it is likely to hit institutions that cater only for post-16 education particularly hard, as they do not have access to any pre-16 funding with which to help offset these losses.

If the 16–18 population falls, as has been predicted (Gravatt 2015), then a drop-off in the overall budget may have a less severe effect in per-pupil terms. The difficulty here, however, is that if the ambition is truly one of full participation through to the age of 18, then any reduction in the underlying population size is likely to be offset by the need to cater for a higher rate of participation.

Even if the policy adopted does not lead to a further widening of the gap between pre- and post-16 funding in the coming years, we start from a place where this gap has already become significant. Given our push for a single, more coherent upper-secondary phase, our desire to see more young people leaving education having completed a broader programme of study, and for this programme to have been developed holistically over a four- or five-year period, effort must be put into closing this funding gap.

10.4 What might have been: a counterfactual analysis of historical 16–18 funding

Our analysis has looked retrospectively at what spending levels might have been over this parliament had the Coalition government chosen to include 16–18 funding within the ringfenced protections.³³ To gauge the impact, we have taken the historical increase in the ringfenced 5–15 budget and retrospectively allocated it to the 5–15 and 16–18 budgets in proportion to the relative size in 2010/11.

³² Again, it is important to note that the figures may be slightly underestimated on the Conservative side, given that any population bulge is likely to be seen within secondary schools where the per-pupil rate is higher than it is in primary education.

³³ As noted previously, separate and additional work would be required to include the impact on early-years funding as well.

Table 10.8

Counterfactual spending by age-group, 2010/11–2015/16 (nominal, £bn)

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Hypothetical (a): historical increase allocated proportionately, 5–15	36.3	36.5	36.7	37.7	38.2	38.6
Hypothetical (b): historical increase allocated proportionately, 16–18	7.7	7.7	7.8	8.1	8.2	8.3
	Outturn	Outturn	Outturn	Plan*	Plan	Forecast**
(c) Actual/plan/forecast spending, 5 to 15	36.3	37.1	37.9	39.9	41.2	41.8
(d) Actual/plan/forecast spending, 16 to 18	7.7	7.6	7.1	7.3	7.0	6.9
Difference, actual vs implied						
5–15: (a) – (c)	0	-0.6	-1.2	-2.2	-3.0	-3.2
16–18: (b) – (d)	0	0.1	0.7	0.8	1.2	1.4

Source: Rows (c) and (d) are taken from table 10.1. Rows (a) and (b) are based on our calculations reallocating the overall increase in 5–15 spending.

Notes:

* 5–15 is based on outturn; 16–18 is based on AoC calculations using planned per-pupil allocations from the EFA funding letter.

** 5–15 forecast is based on an uprating of the 2014/15 plan in line with the GDP deflator at market prices (HMT 2015: table C.2); 16–18 forecast is based on a reduction in the 2014/15 plan derived from estimates by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS 2014) for the average fall in all non-ringfenced budgets for that year.

If the funding had been allocated in this way, the 5–15 budget would still have increased over the period to 2015/16 – from £36.3 billion to £38.6 billion – but would be £3.2 billion lower than forecasts of the actual settlement predict. As shown in table 10.9, this equates to a reduction by £437 per pupil, or funding of £5,345 per pupil in nominal terms, compared with a planned outturn of £5,782 per pupil. Although this would have still constituted a significant cash increase on 2010/11 funding, in real terms it would have reflected a slight fall.

Table 10.9

Hypothetical per-pupil impact, 5–15 age-group (nominal, £)

	2010/11	2011/12 (outturn)	2012/13 (outturn)	2013/14 (outturn)	2014/15 (plan)	2015/16 (plan)
(a) Actual outturn per pupil	5,239	5,334	5,410	5,642	5,768	5,782
(b) Counterfactual outturn per pupil*	5,239	5,242	5,238	5,333	5,347	5,345
Difference: (b) – (a)	0	-92	-172	-309	-421	-437

Source: Rows (a) and (b) are taken from table 10.8, converted to a per-pupil basis using DfE projections and outturns (DfE I).

* Implied spending if increase to 5–15 age-group was instead allocated equally to both 5–15 and 16–18 age-groups.

For 16–18 funding, however, the hypothetical budget would have grown (in nominal terms) by £0.5 billion between 2010/11 and 2014/15, compared with an actual fall of £0.7 billion pounds.³⁴ Again, it is more difficult to translate this into a per-pupil figure, but with a nominal increase in the 16–18 budget of about 6.6 per cent instead of the 9.1 per cent decrease that is actually predicted, it is likely that

34 This would have manifested as a less-severe fall in real terms, after accounting for inflation.

institutions would be facing a much fairer and more even picture across the whole upper-secondary phase than they are currently.

10.5 Towards a fairer funding model for all of upper-secondary education

It is inevitable that the figures in this chapter cannot be completely watertight. This is not only because predictions always contain an element of uncertainty. More crucially, in this area, it is because the different funding formulas are so complex and opaque that it is very difficult to work out exactly what the impact per-pupil of any future change or hypothetical readjustment would be.

Recommendation 13: The next government must be more transparent and consistent with information across the upper-secondary phase, both on average per-pupil funding and post-16 pupil projections.

In particular, this means:

- Publishing a similar level of detail about the 16–18-year-old cohort as they do about younger cohorts – including, for instance, projections of pupil numbers based on population and expected participation.
- Providing more transparent information and data about various budgets, including an agreed and open method for calculating the average per-pupil funding at all age-points and a requirement on ministers to report on and justify such figures.

We also recognise that looking at upper-secondary funding in isolation, while interesting, does not take account of the wider difficult decisions that need to be made about funding, particularly early-years funding.

Therefore, we do not here recommend a particular level of upper-secondary funding that should be provided, nor insist on how it must be achieved. However, **we do recommend that a fresh, critical eye is brought to the challenge of bringing coherence to funding for this part of the system as future spending reviews take place.** There has been a lot of focus on ironing out inconsistencies between regional levels of funding; now is the time to think systemically about how funding can be evened out to ensure that it also allows fair delivery to all age-groups.

Recommendation 14: A future government must reconsider upper-secondary funding and bring more equity to pre- and post-16 figures if they wish to ensure a meaningful, broad curriculum across the phase.

Such analysis also needs to take account of the costs of funding a potentially broader programme in the later years of upper-secondary education than is currently the case, and to what extent this can be achieved within the limits of any future budgetary settlement. Recent analysis conducted for the Sixth Form Colleges Association estimates that delivering a worthwhile sixth form curriculum,³⁵ – with an average of 25 hours of contact time per student per week – would cost between £4,963 per pupil (in classes of 15) to £5,999 per pupil (in classes of 22) (SFCA 2015). Making decisions about funding should therefore involve further analysis of this kind, so that decisions are made based on informed decisions about the kind of curriculum that can be expected universally given the funding levels available.

35 The Sixth Form College Association's proposal is that a 'worthwhile curriculum' equates to: (1) at least four AS levels leading to 3/4/5 full A-levels, the IB or a vocational equivalent; (2) an extended project qualification and/or critical thinking; (3) relevant and demanding work experience; and (4) opportunities for personal growth through wider activities and tutorials for things like target-setting, careers advice, personal support and so on. This would require a minimum of four 4.5-hour blocks per week – one per AS subject or vocational equivalent – plus three hours per week for elements including enrichment, work experience, research short courses and maths and English, and one hour for tutorial sessions.

If one buys into the vision set out in this report – of a more coherent, less disjointed and broader and more stretching education for all young people – then funding also needs to be considered systemically over the upper-secondary phase. It also needs to be realistic about whether difficult decisions about funding may affect the likelihood of the vision and curriculum outlined in this report becoming reality.

11.

OUR EXTENDED PROJECT: AREAS NOT COVERED BY THIS REPORT

There is a lot that is relevant to the topic of upper-secondary education to which this report cannot do justice. Here we try and capture some of those issues (knowing we will probably have missed many more), to sketch out some high-level reflections and point readers in the direction of other interesting work on these areas.

11.1 Careers services

Careers advice and guidance has been a hotly debated topic during the course of this parliament. Former education secretary Michael Gove decided to scrap the schools' careers advice service in its previous form, known as Connexions, and used the Education Act 2011 to transfer the duty to secure access to independent, impartial careers guidance for pupils in years 9 to 11 from local authorities to schools. Many have been extremely critical of the resulting impact. In 2013 the education select committee concluded that careers advice was 'deteriorating' and that there were 'grave shortcomings' in the government's approach (ESC 2013). Ofsted conducted a survey which found that in three-quarters of schools 'careers guidance was not working well' (Ofsted 2013). Since then, Nicky Morgan has taken on the position of education secretary and seemingly made careers advice a priority, sourcing £20 million to establish a new careers and enterprise company. It is obviously too early to gauge what the impact of this new company will be.

Many reports, including a very recent report by Teach First and several recent reports by IPPR (Teach First 2015, Raikes 2015 forthcoming, Dolphin 2014) have highlighted how important careers advice and guidance is for young people and outlined how it might be improved both at a national and local level. No upper-secondary system is going to be successful unless young people are helped to navigate it and make sensible choices as they mature. Given the wealth of suggestions in these reports and elsewhere, we make no further suggestions here about how to improve careers education in schools.

Our only note of caution would be that we must be very careful about terminology in this area. There are two key facets to this part of the upper-secondary system – 'progression guidance' (good, impartial advice about a young person's immediate next step and options) and 'careers education' (the space to explore career possibilities and opportunities to engage with employers to understand career options). Whatever future policy is adopted, it must be clear which of these two different angles is being addressed in any case, what is required, and to whom the responsibility falls.

11.2 The post-19 technical pathway

This report has made proposals that focus on the upper-secondary 14–19 age-group, but it is obviously important that the wider system is able to respond to help young people continue their progress beyond the upper-secondary phase.

Chapter 6 set out a clear plan for vocational education. It proposed, for instance, that overarching vocational standards for the upper-secondary phase should be developed, complemented by a broader, general education for all young people.

However, such a vision needs to lead somewhere that allows a young person to take the next step and further refine their skills.

As IPPR's previous Commission into the Future of Higher Education concluded:

'The UK's deficit in technical and intermediate skills will mean that the government must prioritise more and better-quality apprenticeships and a structured system of college-based vocational learning, both to meet skills shortages and to provide greater opportunities for those young people not on the "A-level to-university" track.'

CFHE 2013

Apprenticeships should be one way to train for a specific career following a broader upper-secondary education, and expanding the number of apprenticeships available to those who want them at 19 is a priority for both major political parties.

It is also imperative to think about those who, at this point, do not wish to immediately progress into a job but do wish to continue with a higher level of vocational education. At the moment there is a relatively clear pathway for those who want to further their academic study by going to university or for those who want to move straight into an apprenticeship or job. Despite calls for strengthening our provision of 'advanced vocational learning' through strengthening FE colleges to become 'polytechnics' and more diversification of offer by existing universities, very little has happened in this space (CFHE 2013). While this report looks at reforming the upper-secondary phase, it is important that policymakers continue to consider how to cater for those leaving upper-secondary education who want to access higher education and pursue advanced vocational learning.

11.3 NEETs

This report has focussed on developing a vision in which all young people succeed in a broad, stretching programmes of study during upper-secondary education, preparing them to transition into and thrive in adult life. We accept, however, that there may continue to be vulnerable young people who struggle to make the transition out of upper-secondary education and who subsequently flounder. Again, there has been a lot of good, recent thinking about the wider problem of young people who are NEET ('not in education, employment or training') and this report does not seek to make further recommendations.

We reiterate the approach that was central to IPPR's *No more NEETs* report (Cooke 2013), namely that a distinct learning and earning track should be developed within the social security system for young people who struggle to make the transition out of upper-secondary education. Broadly, this would incorporate:

- a **youth allowance** that replaces existing out-of-work benefits for 18–24-year-olds and provides financial support for young people who need it, conditional on participation in purposeful training or intensive job search
- a **youth guarantee** that offers young people access to further education or vocational training plus intensive support to find work or an apprenticeship. For those not learning or earning after six months, paid work experience and traineeships would be provided, with no option to refuse and to continue to receive the youth allowance.

Finally, we are only likely to solve the NEET problem if we truly know who these most vulnerable young people are. Tracking of NEETs has been highlighted as a problem in a recent report by the Fabian Society and Impetus, and this is a crucial issue to tackle (Brookes 2014).

11.4 English and mathematics

We know from the international comparisons outlined in chapter 2 that England's young people perform relatively poorly in literacy and numeracy. We have used this report to reiterate the message, shared by all parties and all perspectives, that all young people must leave upper-secondary education with sufficient literacy and numeracy skills to thrive in adult life.

At the moment, the 'bar' set by the government to demonstrate that a young person has met the required level is achieving a C grade in level 2 GCSE English and mathematics. It is debatable, however, whether achieving a C in GCSE and mathematics as a minimum is necessarily always going to be the right qualification for a young person to gain and demonstrate the skills which will be of most use in later life. The question that has been on the mind of many is whether it will always work to simply insist that a young person continues to retake a GCSE up until the age of 19, as Alison Wolf suggests in her review, or if there is another tack that could be taken to ensure that a young person still achieves the robust levels of literacy and numeracy that they need and employers want.

This question applies not only to the minimum level of achievement. We also want to foster a system where young people, even once they have achieved the 'required' level of literacy and numeracy, go on to continue to stretch themselves further in these vital subjects.

However, an Ofqual study has showed that A-level mathematics and English continue to be very specialised, deep qualifications, compared to the literacy and numeracy qualification options in other successful countries (Ofqual 2012). The development of the 'core maths' qualification tries to address this issue to some extent, by providing a level 3 qualification which allows young people to further their mathematics skills through their application towards 'real-life' qualifications.

We do not propose a solution here, but do suggest that further exploration and research is needed into:

- what forms of qualifications are needed, in literacy and numeracy, both as the minimum 'bar' and to stretch those who can go further
- how can these qualifications best be assessed to ensure that a young person can demonstrate their abilities flexibly.³⁶ For instance, do we need more flexible assessment which can be taken online as and when a student is ready to demonstrate the skills they have acquired?

The government has recently commissioned the Education and Training Foundation to lead a review into what employers need in terms of literacy and numeracy from young people who are not on the GCSE route. It will be interesting what this, and further research, concludes on this important issue.

³⁶ We consider flexibility to be an important principle, as we want young people to be able to continually stretch themselves. They should not be limited by a ceiling in the level they are able to be assessed at, nor prevented from demonstrating that they have gone beyond level 2, even if they are not quite able to pass at level 3, nor tied to the fixed termly or yearly exam cycles to show that they have met the required minimum level when they are ready to do so.

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APPENDIX: MEMBERSHIP OF THE PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP

- **Lord Andrew Adonis**, chair of trustees, IPPR
- **Patrick Craven**, director of policy, research and compliance, City and Guilds
- **Martin Doel**, chief executive, Association of Colleges
- **Tony Dolphin**, senior economist and associate director for economic policy, IPPR
- **James Epps**, programme manager in education, Gatsby Foundation
- **David Harbourne**, director of policy and research, Edge Foundation
- **Ann Hodgson**, professor of post-compulsory education and co-director of the Centre for Post-14 Research and Innovation, UCL Institute of Education
- **Stephen Munday**, chief Executive, Comberton Academy Trust, and executive principal, Comberton and Cambourne Village Colleges
- **Rick Muir**, associate director for public service reform, IPPR
- **Jenny North**, director of policy and strategy, Impetus – The Private Equity Foundation
- **Paul O’Shea**, principal, St Charles Catholic Sixth Form College
- **Nick Pearce (chair)**, director, IPPR
- **Tom Richmond**, senior policy advisor at the Department for Education (vocational education and skills)
- **Katerina Rudiger**, head of skills and policy campaigns, CIPD
- **Conor Ryan**, director of research and communications, Sutton Trust
- **Dame Ruth Silver**, co-chair, Skills Commission, and founding president, Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL)
- **Sue Taylor**, principal, Accrington and Rossendale College
- **Lorna Unwin**, professor emerita in vocational education, UCL Institute of Education