

## Issues Paper 8

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### Where do all the learners go? Efficiency and equity in the provision of 16-19 learning opportunities

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#### *Summary*

*Ensuring adequate and appropriate education and training opportunities for all 16-19 year olds has become a major policy issue over the last thirty years. This priority was, to some extent, forced upon the first Thatcher government by rapidly rising youth unemployment and the spectre of inner city riots. Now encouraging a greater proportion of young people to delay their transition into the labour market has become a central concern of government education and training policy. Investment in the Learning and Skills Sector in England has increased by 48% since 1997, with much of this money being directed at 16-19 year olds; currently just over half of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) budget is spent on this age group. Does this investment produce value for money and who is benefiting from it? This issues paper draws on work undertaken as part of the Nuffield 14-19 Review<sup>1</sup> to discuss these questions with a focus on one indicator of system performance, participation rates.*

#### **System Performance**

Current policy documents rightly celebrate the increased numbers of 16-19 year olds participating in education and training across schools, sixth form colleges, general FE and tertiary colleges, and various forms of

government sponsored work based training, such as apprenticeship (e.g. LSC, 2005). However, these increases in numbers participating must be set against demographic changes: the size of the age cohort is increasing. Examining the proportion of 16 year olds participating reveals a different story. Following a sharp increase in the participation rate between 1985 and 1994, the proportion of sixteen year olds participating in some form of education and training has declined by 5 percentage points over the last decade (Hayward et al. 2005).

The last two decades has also seen a major change in the mode of participation. Increasingly young people have opted to remain in schools and colleges for post-compulsory education with a concomitant decrease in participation rates in the work-based routes. Within the school/college route, more young people have chosen to study for GCE A levels, though there has also been increased participation in level 3 vocational qualifications. However, this latter increase is concentrated mainly in vocational qualifications offered in schools, notably advanced GNVQ and VCE A levels. Such qualifications have been described as being 'weakly vocational' compared to vocational qualifications such as BTEC National offered by FE and Tertiary colleges (Brown et al, 2004).

The proportion of 16 year olds studying for level 1 and 2 qualifications in schools and sixth form colleges has also declined, with Further Education and Tertiary colleges now providing the vast majority of provision for these learners. The result is an increasing polarisation of the post-compulsory education and training system, with the lowest attaining 16 year-old learners and those from minority ethnic groups being disproportionately represented in general Further Education and Tertiary colleges. There have been improvements in participation rates for all 16-19 year olds over the last decade. But, the rate of improvement has been more rapid for some groups than others, notably the better off and young women. The system under performs in terms of attracting white working class young men and those from the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities.

### **Accounting for change**

Understanding these changes requires setting the 16-19 education and training system within its wider educational, historical and social context in order to appreciate the changing institutional opportunities and incentives (and disincentives) to participate. Collectively the opportunities and incentives on offer produce a decision field that is actively interpreted by young people - "What kind of education does someone like me need to be the sort of person I want to be? And is it possible? Is it worth it? And what are the alternatives?" In addition, there are changing pressures on educational institutions linked to factors that are exogenous to the education and training system, such as shifts in demography and the labour market, and those that are endogenous to it,

such as new governance arrangements, qualifications, and accountability frameworks. Putting these together enables the construction of a preliminary explanation of the changes that have occurred in participation rates over the last twenty years.

### **The phase of expansion: 1985-1994**

The early 1980s were characterised both by a major economic recession and by a radical restructuring of the labour market associated with deindustrialisation. This saw the disappearance of many 'respectable' working class and unskilled manual jobs. As the economy emerged from recession in the mid 1980s, social security provision for 16 and 17 year-olds was removed. The high levels of youth unemployment of the time and the lack of social security would have reduced the opportunity costs associated with continued participation in education and training for young people and their families, leading to an increase in demand.

'Actors' in education institutions would also have been aware of the need to expand the range of students that they recruited to post-16 provision to meet the challenge of maintaining student numbers at a time of severe demographic decline. This could have led to all institutions diversifying their provision to include, for example, more participation at both Level 2 and Level 3. However, the introduction of a new qualification, GCSE, provided an increased supply of young people with the characteristics needed for recruitment to GCE A Level courses.

This is where the major expansion occurred, as young people who might have participated previously in work-based routes were drawn into full time education. The growing availability of prevocational courses in the late 1980s also offered opportunities for substituting this provision for GCSE retakes, but did not result in a major expansion of Level 2 learning compared with Level 3 learning.

In addition, it is likely that ongoing Conservative social and economic reforms produced a shift in aspiration for their children among an increasingly property-owning society. This effect seems to have been particularly pronounced for young women. Such changes in the societal context would have acted to push more young people into an education system more willing to accept them. The introduction of GCSE, however, enabled schools and sixth form colleges to proceed to do this in a way that did not require them to offer a more comprehensive provision of post-16 learning opportunities. The result has been the continuation of a selective and divided post-16 education and training system.

## **The phase of stagnation: 1994-2005**

Growth in participation rates slowed and then stagnated after 1994. In part this can be attributed to the stabilisation of participation rates in Full-Time Education (FTE), which had been the motor of expansion. The increasing size of the age cohort meant, however, that the number of young people in FTE was still increasing, further relieving the economic pressures on schools and sixth form colleges to expand their provisions to encompass a more diverse student body. While there was still an increase in the supply of those with higher level GCSE passes, the rate of growth in this supply was decreasing, limiting the scope for further expansion in GCE A Level participation rates. However, the advent of the weakly vocational Advanced GNVQ and then the VCE A Level provided new opportunities for schools to retain learners with some of the markings of future success, a key criterion for selection in an age of league tables and competition for the best students in the educational quasi-market. However, this reduced further the need to provide post-16 provision in schools for Level 2 learners, which declined steeply during this phase.

The continuing recovery of the labour market after 1994 led to an expansion in demand for better qualified labour during this period. Young people who were able to do so opted to continue their learning through the GCE A Level to degree route to meet this demand. The expansion of Higher Education encouraged this. However, the evidence also suggests that there was some expansion in demand for less-qualified workers.

This raised the opportunity costs of participating in vocational education and training programmes that offer only minor, if any, return in the labour market. As a result, young people began once again to drift out of the education and training system at 16 and 17 to enter the labour market, leading to the decline in participation observed after 1993/4.

## **Conclusion**

Since 1985 participation rates have improved across all groups of young people but relative differences of access to post-16 learning opportunities have not declined over time; that is the system does not appear to have become more socially inclusive. Such differences in access do not necessarily imply inequality but it does appear that entry to the post-16 system, both in terms of what can be studied and where, is increasingly selective. This selective effect may weigh most heavily on those who have to leave school at 16 because there are no appropriate learning opportunities available for them within these institutions. This burden has increased over time as maintained schools have increasingly specialised in providing Level 3 courses.

This has increasingly left general FE and tertiary colleges, and work-based learning (WBL) providers, to meet the needs of the lowest attaining students in a system which inequitably distributes resources. For example, per capita funding for FE colleges is lower than for school sixth forms, the FE workforce is relatively less well paid than school teachers and is becoming more contingent over time. Such differences make the task of constructing appropriate learning environments in FE colleges to meet the needs of young people who have achieved only limited educational success even more demanding.

The polarisation of the 16-19 education and training system reflects wider social inequalities, particularly in the distribution of income. For many young people the system appears to be working well. They are progressing into Level 3 provision, gaining their qualifications and moving on to HE. However, increases in participation in this pathway have occurred more among the middle than the working classes. The expansion of HE, for example, has been overwhelmingly a middle class phenomenon. Other young people are being left behind and this has long-term implications for them in terms of their future employment and incomes. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that the education and training system cannot create more interesting and well-paid jobs. That depends upon employers and their strategic decisions in relation to the product strategy of their organisations and the sorts of work design they will use to pursue that strategy.

The education system, by qualifying more young people, at best changes their relative position in a job queue seeking access to those positions. The system has so far been unsuccessful in changing long-established inequalities in gaining such access but this may not appear as a weakness for a government keen to encourage diversity in the supply of educational services.

Perhaps the most pressing policy problem is the still modest rates of participation in the English post-compulsory education and training system compared with our European neighbours. The hope is that further qualification reform in the form of the proposed specialised diplomas and continued marketing of apprenticeship will reduce the drop out rate among 16 and 17 year-olds. However, previous attempts to provide alternative provision in the form of government-sponsored apprenticeships, WBL and full-time vocational provision have not been particularly successful in attracting the hardest to reach young people. It is difficult to see how these initiatives will be successful in raising participation rates without labour market regulation, for example tying vocational qualifications more closely to licences to practise, as occurs in many European countries and Australia. This would have the twin effect of, first, making employers take notice of these qualifications and participate in their construction, and, second, requiring such qualifications to meet occupational standards as well as providing a more general education.

In spite of the rhetoric of the knowledge economy, the UK labour market continues to provide a large number of job opportunities for poorly qualified entrants. The weak performance of the vocational pathways can be inextricably linked to this continuing labour market demand, and the UK stands in stark contrast to its European neighbours in terms of the number of young people who are in the labour market. It is difficult to see why young people should be convinced it is in their interest to incur the opportunity costs of participating in vocational learning that has little if any return on the labour market without regulation of the youth labour market. The principle of voluntarism, on which both the involvement of young people and employers in post-compulsory secondary education and training depends, simply does not seem to work in terms of promoting high levels of participation among young people and their employers in training. However, the political price of addressing these issues may be too high in a liberalised market economy. In this case, the current levels of participation and the increasing polarisation within the system may be the price that has to be paid for a deregulated labour market.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Details of the Nuffield Review can be found at:  
[www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk](http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk)

## References

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