

For all the young people – and there a great many of them – who don't get five or more good GCSE grades at 16, there needs to be a better system. These young people shouldn't be seen to have failed, but celebrated for the talented and important people that they are. We need to make sure our system does just that and fills them, their families and employers with confidence for the future.

Peter Mayhew-Smith, June 2016

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SPOTLIGHT PROJECT

The further education landscape is currently undergoing a process of considerable reform. With a strong political consensus around Apprenticeships, productivity, and cutting the national deficit, we expect to see further changes to the system and its structures over the next five years. The nature of these changes will be informed and directed by the forthcoming skills white paper – the first in a decade – and the conclusions reached by the independent panel, led by Lord Sainsbury, looking into technical and professional education.

At this time of seismic change we have become increasingly concerned that the attention given to the ongoing process of structural reform is pulling focus away from particular groups; some of which have traditionally been marginalised within education and employment, while others are facing new challenges.

The *Spotlight* inquiry will examine how a number of distinct groups experience the skills system and, in doing so, will highlight: good practice; how provision can be improved; where certain groups require additional support; and, the particular challenges and difficulties certain groups face within the skills sector.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barry Sheerman".

Barry Sheerman MP

Skills Commission Co-Chairs



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ruth Silver".

Dame Ruth Silver

INTRODUCTION

The *Spotlight on... young people* report has been developed by the Skills Commission to cast a spotlight on the experience of young people between the ages of 16 and 18 who did not achieve 5 A*-C grades at GCSE, including English and maths, at age 16.

Making-up almost half of the cohort – 46.2% in all schools in 2015 – this is a broad demographic, which encompasses a diverse range of individuals of mixed ability, who come from different backgrounds and are at varying stages of their development.¹ Throughout this report this group will be referred to as young people with below average academic attainment.

Since September 2015 changes to the education and training participation age require that all young people aged 16-18 must be in some form of education or training. From the age of 16 a young person is able to choose between three education/training options:

1. Stay in full-time education
2. Start an Apprenticeship or Traineeship
3. Work or volunteer (for 20 hours or more a week) while in part-time education or training²

Public discourse surrounding the post-16 options available to young people is dominated by the 'traditional' academic pathway (A Levels and Higher Education). The Commission is worried that the attention given to the traditional academic pathway has led to the undervaluing of technical and professional education which is underappreciated and little understood by policy makers. Young people who would excel in technical, professional or vocational settings have been under-served by this cultural and political bias.

While the further education (FE) sector offers opportunities for learners with a wide range of abilities, it is young people with below average academic attainment who often turn to further education, vocational and in-work training to gain qualifications and improve their life chances. The undervaluing of vocational education in comparison to the traditional route has negatively impacted upon the prospects of young people with below average academic attainment.

¹DfE, *School and College Performance Tables, 'Final KS4 2014 Results/KS4 Exam Results: 2014'*, available at: <http://www.education.gov.uk/cgi-bin/schools/performance/2014/group.pl?gtype=NAT&superview=sec&view=aat&set=2&sort=&ord=&tab=150&no=999&pg=1>

² Gov.Uk, 'School Leaving Age', available at: <https://www.gov.uk/know-when-you-can-leave-school>

We hope that this report and the *Spotlight* project as a whole will highlight the systemic gaps in education and skills policy that urgently need filling.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "P. Mayhew-Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping 'S' at the end.

Peter Mayhew-Smith

Inquiry Chair

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

The Department for Education should consider broader performance measures for schools or include an art or tech based subject in the Ebacc suite of GCSEs to ensure breadth in the curriculum.

Recommendation 2

To help promote a diverse curriculum, the DfE should monitor the uptake of Technical Awards and ensure they are properly signposted to learners, parents and guardians, employers and education and training providers.

Recommendation 3

As participation in the EBacc grows, the government must ensure that curriculum and assessment give young people the full range of opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities and have sufficient breadth to engage different types of learner.

Recommendation 4

The DfE and Ofqual should consider whether a post-16 modular GCSE should be introduced for learners retaking English and maths GCSEs.

Recommendation 5

Government and education and training providers should make a concerted effort to boost the recognition, reputation and esteem given to Functional Skills qualifications.

Recommendation 6

Additional support needs to be made available to FE providers to allow them to fully meet the needs of 16-18 learners with below average academic attainment. In particular, additional financial support should be allocated to institutions working with a large proportion of young people with below average academic attainment in recognition of the high level of support these students require and the challenge faced by the FE sector of recruiting high quality English and maths teachers.

Recommendation 7

BIS and the DfE should adopt the transition framework outlined in the Lords Social Mobility report.

Recommendation 8

The government must make sure that the bodies responsible for oversight are properly equipped to guarantee the quality and effectiveness of Apprenticeships and ensure Apprenticeship outcomes are effectively monitored and evaluated.

Recommendation 9

The IFA should consider how young apprentices can access the social, professional and pastoral networks and services their peers in colleges, sixth forms or universities have.

Recommendation 10

BIS and the DfE should consult with employers and providers on what a pre-Apprenticeship year of general education and training might look like.

Recommendation 11

Government and schools must recognise the importance of careers IAG and work to improve the IAG offer available to young people. Funding should be allocated to facilitate this.

Recommendation 12

To better support young people with below average academic attainment, DfE and BIS must address the aggressive student recruitment and retention practices of schools and sixth-forms - learners must be made aware of all the different post-16 pathways available to them, including Apprenticeships.

Recommendation 13

The government must develop more flexible transition frameworks that account for learners' different rates of development.

Recommendation 14

Government and training providers must increase the support available to help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds access their potential. In particular, government must do more to encourage uptake of FSM so that FSM eligible young people are able to access the support they are entitled to.

Recommendation 15

Government needs to do more to research the significance of childhood disadvantage and measure its impact on a young person's life outcomes in order to understand better how to combat its effects.

1 ASSESSMENT AT 16

1.1. Measuring Ability at 16

GCSEs are the main measure of ‘ability’, or rather, academic ability, at age 16. The vast majority of learners – over 90% of the cohort since 2010³ – will be studying towards GCSEs by their 16th birthday. GCSEs benefit from having a brand which employers, training providers and learners and their guardians are familiar with.

Although 69% of GCSE entrants were awarded an A*-C grade in 2015, just under half the cohort – 46.2% in all schools in 2015 – failed to achieve the ‘benchmark’ grades of 5 A*-C grades, including English and maths, at GCSE.⁴

That such a significant proportion of the cohort – around 270,000 learners – miss out on achieving the ‘benchmark’ and gaining a C or above in English and maths is a damning indictment of our education system. In the short term, the impact of not achieving the ‘benchmark’ can be detrimental to a young person’s self-esteem and attitude to learning, and can limit their range of post-16 options.

In the long term, underachievement at 16 can significantly affect an individual’s employment and earnings prospects. For example, a recent study by the Department for Education (DfE) found that young people who do not achieve the benchmark GCSEs will be at least £60,000 worse off over their lifetime compared to those who do achieve the average (and above) grades at GCSE.⁵

The Commission recognises the efforts taken by the 2010-2015 Coalition Government, and those of the current government, to raise standards and improve outcomes in schools, especially in the wake of recent PISA findings. However, we are concerned by some of the potential implications of changes to GCSEs, and how the opportunities afforded by the current reforms, to make an education system that works for everyone, may be missed.

³ CVER research, LSE, Table 1

⁴ Gov.Uk (2015), ‘Summer 2015 GCSE Results: A Brief Explanation’, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/summer-2015-gcse-results-a-brief-explanation>

⁵ E Hunt, J Vernoit, (2014), ‘Valuing Educational Progress in England: the Economic Benefits of the Progress Made in GCSE Performance’, p. 4, available at: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/21533/2/RR398B_-_Valuing_Educational_Progress.pdf

Recent and Incoming Changes to GCSEs:

English Baccalaureate

Introduced in 2010 the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) is a school performance measure which shows how many pupils get a grade C or above in the core academic subjects at Key Stage 4.

In June 2015, the government announced its intention that all pupils who start year 7 in September 2015 take the EBacc subjects when they reach their GCSEs in 2020. These include; English, maths, history or geography, the sciences and a language.

Modular to linear assessment

From 2012 GCSE programmes, as well as AS and A Levels, moved from modular assessment to candidates sitting all exams for their qualifications at the end of the full course in June. Opportunities for mid-course re-sitting have also been limited to re-takes of English and maths GCSEs in an autumn exam.

Technical Awards

Classified in 2015, Technical Awards are broad Level 1 and 2 qualifications designed to enable smoother transitions from general education into technical, professional and vocational training pathways. Up to 3 Technical Awards can be taken by students at Key Stage 4, alongside 5 GCSEs from the EBacc subjects.

English and maths

Since August 2015 Study Programmes, recommended in the Wolf Review, require full time students, aged 16-18, who hold a D grade in their English or maths GCSEs to be enrolled on English and maths GCSEs retake – rather than stepping stone qualifications.

New GCSE grading system

In 2017 a new GCSE grading system will come into effect. This will replace the existing alphabetical system by allocating students a numerical value, from 1-9, depending on their GCSE result.

The new system will alter the current benchmark, raising the threshold for a pass. Learners currently achieving a C grade will be split between the new Levels 4 and 5, with Level 5 being considered the new benchmark for a 'good pass' grade. Learners who achieve a Level 4 (the equivalent of a low grade C under the current system) will not be considered to have achieved the benchmark grade.

1.2. Learners and GCSE Reforms

The Commission is concerned that the current GCSE reforms risk limiting choice and increasing failure.

Reaching the government’s ambition of almost all students taking the EBacc suite of subjects by 2020 will require a significant shift in focus in many schools. In 2015, only 38.6% of the GCSE cohort was entered for EBacc subjects.⁶ Within schools this shift will have significant implications for departmental budgets, and many fear that this will narrow the curriculum, limiting access to creative and technical subjects.

The Commission adds its support to calls from organisations such as the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the Education Select Committee for the government to ensure flexibility in the curriculum.⁷

Breadth of curriculum is vital in engaging learners and ensuring that the system works for all young people, regardless of their various learning preferences, providing them with strong foundations for the pursuit of further learning and development whether it be academic, technical, professional or vocational. With this in mind the Commission recommends:

Recommendation 1

The Department for Education should consider broader performance measures for schools or include an art or tech based subject in the Ebacc suite of GCSEs to ensure breadth in the curriculum.

Recommendation 2

To help promote a diverse curriculum, the DfE should monitor the uptake of Technical Awards and ensure they are properly signposted to learners, parents and guardians, employers and education and training providers.

The EBacc subjects are acknowledged as being most academically demanding. As greater numbers of learners take up these subjects and the other GCSE reforms take effect it is likely that fewer learners will achieve the current and incoming benchmark grades at GCSE. In particular, it is predicted that incoming changes will penalise less academically inclined learners resulting in more young people ending their school careers in what will be perceived as ‘failure’.

⁶ DfE (2015), ‘Consultation on Implementing the English Baccalaureate’, p. 17, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/473455/Consultation_on_implementing_the_English_Baccalaureate.pdf

⁷ See: NAHT (2016), ‘EBacc Offers a Narrow Vision of Academic Excellence’, available at: <http://www.naht.org.uk/welcome/news-and-media/key-topics/curriculum/ebacc-offers-a-narrow-vision-of-academic-excellence/>; and, Education Select Committee (2011), ‘The English Baccalaureate: Fifth Report of Session 2010-12’, available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmeduc/851/851.pdf>

Throughout their time in education and training, young people should experience different methods of assessment – for example, technical, practical, written and oral modes of assessment. Exposure to a variety of assessment methods can measure different skills and also better inform a learner’s thinking regarding their future education and training options.

The Commission accepts the need for rigour in the system; however, it is concerned about reinforcing a system that sets up a large number of young people to fail by assessing them against a narrow criteria. Alongside a sustained improvement strategy across our schools the Commission would like to see:

Recommendation 3

As participation in the EBacc grows, the government must ensure that curriculum and assessment give young people the full range of opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities and have sufficient breadth to engage different types of learner.

2 GCSE RETAKES

2.1. Success Rates

Since August 2014 all full time learners who do not hold English and maths GCSEs have been required to continue English and maths study during 16-18 education or training.⁸ Changes brought into effect in August 2015 mean that students, aged 16-18, who hold a D grade in their English or maths GCSEs need to be enrolled on English and maths GCSE retakes – rather than alternatives or stepping stone qualifications.⁹

This means that the 40-50% of below average attaining students who do not usually choose to take any English or maths qualifications under the optional retake system will now have to do so, and more of these young people will have to take GCSEs.¹⁰

As the number of young people retaking GCSE English and maths grows, the proportion of young people who do not achieve the benchmark grades at their second attempt is also likely to increase.

'A greater proportion of those retaking English and maths GCSEs failed to achieve the benchmark grades compared to those who did'

At present GCSEs are the most common form of English and maths qualification to be taken or retaken post-16. However, the number of young people who do not gain English and maths qualifications by 16, and who subsequently achieve any Level 2 English or maths qualifications aged 16-18 is already very small.

Table 1 shows the English and maths qualifications achieved at 16-18 by those not achieving A*-C by age 16. In 2013/14 only 11.3% and 7% of those who hadn't passed English and maths at the end of Key Stage 4 went on to achieve an A*-C in retakes that year. Indeed, for the past several years a greater proportion of those retaking English and maths GCSEs failed to achieve the benchmark grades compared to those who did.

⁸ DfE (2015), 'Level 1 and 2 Attainment in English and maths by students aged 16-18: Academic Year 2013/14', p.3, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/466152/SFR_35_2015_Main_Text.pdf

⁹ Gov.Uk (2016), '16 to 19 Funding: Maths and English Condition of Funding', available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-funding-maths-and-english-condition-of-funding#grade-d-requirement-to-the-condition-of-funding>

¹⁰ N Porter (August, 2015), 'Crossing the Line: Improving Success Rates Among Students Retaking English and Maths GCSEs', p. 3, available at: <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/crossing%20the%20line.pdf>

Table 1: Post-16 Achievement of English and maths qualifications by those not achieving A*-C by the end of KS4¹¹

	Proportion of students who achieved English qualifications of those not achieving A*-C by the end of KS4 (at age 16)		Proportion of students who achieved maths qualifications of those not achieving A*-C by the end of KS4 (at age 16)	
	Academic Year		Academic Year	
	2012/13	2013/14	2012/13	2013/14
Percentage achieving GCSE at A*-C	6.5%	11.3%	7%	7.1%
Percentage achieving other Level 2 qualifications	6%	9.2%	5%	5.7%
Percentage achieving GCSE English at D-G	9.4%	12.5%	9.9%	11.3%
Percentage achieving other Level 1 qualifications	16.7%	14.6%	15.9%	15.7%
Percentage achieving Entry Level qualifications	13.7%	10.9%	14.8%	15.4%

¹¹ DfE, 'Level 1 and 2 Attainment in English and maths by students aged 16-18: Academic Year 2013/14', p. 10

Too many young people with below average academic attainment fail to achieve the benchmark GCSE grades when they retake. Repeating failure is of no benefit; it leads to young people disengaging from learning, becoming demotivated, and negatively impacts their wellbeing and sense of self-worth.

2.2. Alternative Formats

It must be recognised that many people will not work well within the GCSE framework. The low retake success rates outlined in Table 1 show that young people with below average attainment struggle to succeed when pushed into GCSE retakes during 16-18 education.

The system needs to be changed to account for these young people and ensure they have the opportunity to gain qualifications to demonstrate their ability. There is no value – rather, there is likely a cost – gained by entering a young person for an exam they have little chance of passing, as is too frequently the case in GCSE retakes.

Within the existing GCSE teaching framework small adjustments can be made to help more young people who retake their English and maths GCSEs post-16 succeed. Research by the Learning and Work Institute (formerly NIACE) found that learners retaking English and maths GCSEs post-16 responded best to teaching methods which: recognised their maturity and treated them like adults; embedded English and maths teaching within a more applied, practical framework; personalised comments and feedback.¹²

If young people are to be required to retake English and maths GCSEs the Commission suggests that the government reconsider the format of the exams. In a recent review of prison education, Dame Sally Coates advocated for the introduction of modular GCSEs for prisoners as part of reforms to allow inmates to develop base-level “job ready” skills and gain qualifications during their incarceration.¹³ For learners who may have struggled with the examinations the first time round a similar approach or “post-16 modular GCSE” should be looked into as its flexibility would be better suited to non-academically inclined young adults.

Recommendation 4

The DfE and Ofqual should consider whether a post-16 modular GCSE should be introduced for learners retaking English and maths GCSEs.

¹² C Robey, E Jones, 'Engaging Learners in GCSE Maths and English' (2015), NIACE, p. 17-18, available at: http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/sites/niace_en/files/resources/Engaging%20learners%20in%20GCSE%20maths%20and%20English.pdf

¹³ S Coates, Ministry of Justice, 'Unlocking Potential: A Review of Education in Prison' P. 14, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf

2.3. English and Maths or Literacy and Numeracy?

The Commission would also encourage the government to consider the advantages of alternative qualifications to English and maths GCSE such as Functional Skills.

It is important for employers that, by aged 18, a young person is able to demonstrate their literacy and numeracy ability with a qualification. However it should not materially matter, for instance, that one young person may be able to demonstrate their numeracy ability with a maths GCSE, while another may do so with a Functional Skills Level 2 or 3 numeracy qualification.

The Commission has been told that, when delivered well, Functional Skills are an excellent and effective mechanism for building the functional levels of literacy and numeracy valued by employers. Research into the teaching and learning of mathematics has underlined the benefits of contextualised, vocational, learning, the hallmark of Functional Skills, compared to traditional academic learning.¹⁴

While GCSEs are the most widely recognised brand of Level 2 qualification, the relative strength of the brand should not distract from the suitability of alternative English and maths qualifications for learners and employers.

Although fewer employers are familiar with Functional Skills than the GCSE brand, recent Education & Training Foundation (ETF) research highlights how the reputation of Functional Skills is growing amongst employers. The ETF found that 37% of employers surveyed were ‘very familiar with Functional Skills’ and that, of the employers who were familiar with Functional Skills, 87% ‘think they are very useful or fairly useful to the world of work’.¹⁵

Referring to the 37% figure of employer recognition of Functional Skills, Ian Pursglove, Associate Director at Ofqual has said ‘To put it in context, GCSEs took 19 years to get to the same level of trust and confidence with employers.’¹⁶ With that in mind there is no reason to believe that Functional Skills literacy and numeracy at Level 2 could not be a viable alternative to GCSE retakes.

Recommendation 5

Government and education and training providers should make a concerted effort to boost the recognition, reputation and esteem given to Functional Skills qualifications.

¹⁴ The Education & Training Foundation (December, 2014), ‘Effective Practices in Post-16 Vocational Maths: Final Report’, p. 5, available at: <http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Effective-Practices-in-Post-16-Vocational-Maths-v4-0.pdf>

¹⁵ The Education & Training Foundation (March, 2015), ‘Making maths and English Work for All’, p. 10-11, available at: http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Making-maths-and-English-work-for-all-25_03_2015001.pdf

¹⁶ Westminster Employment Forum (14th April, 2016), ‘Where Next for Functional Skills Qualifications and Adult English and Maths Policy in England?’, Ian Pursglove: *The Future of Functional Skills Qualifications*

2.4. Trouble Ahead

Reforms to GCSEs and the requirement for learners to retake English and maths mean increasing numbers of students will not reach the benchmark and will have to retake English and maths GCSEs on leaving Key Stage 3.

In addition to the increased numbers of learners retaking English and maths that providers will have to cater for, it is also likely that a significant proportion of these learners will be harder to engage than the learners who currently resit their English and maths exams. This poses a significant challenge to certain providers, see tables 2 and 3. Given the current retake success rate, the scale of this challenge should not be underestimated.

It is currently largely left to the FE sector to re-engage learners with below average attainment and help them secure the qualifications and skills they need to succeed beyond 16-18 education and training. At present FE colleges are disproportionately charged with responsibility for progressing these learners, who have arguably been failed by the school system, through GCSE retakes.

Table 2: Number of learners, aged 16-18, retaking GCSE English by institution (from the 2011 GCSE cohort)¹⁷

Institution	Number of Students
FE College	100,239
Sixth-Form	8,738
School	20,554

Table 3: Number of learners, aged 16-18, retaking GCSE maths by institution (from the 2011 GCSE cohort)¹⁸

Institution	Number of Students
FE College	110,811
Sixth-Form	11,193
School	27,579

¹⁷ N Porter, 'Crossing the Line', p. 4

¹⁸ N Porter, 'Crossing the Line', p.5

FE colleges however face significant resource challenges in complying with the government's reforms and new funding rules. Over the last five years FE colleges have received annual funding cuts.¹⁹ There is also a shortage of English and maths teachers across the post-16 sector.²⁰

The lack of significant additional funding for institutions working with a high proportion of young people with below average attainment does not reflect the considerable amount of catch-up learning and remedial support required by these learners. Young people who enter college with below average attainment often bring with them a number of challenges which FE institutions need to overcome. These can include: poor learner attendance, punctuality and retention; low rates of progression and English and maths difficulties; disengagement with education caused by bad past experiences.

With significantly more below average attaining students having to retake, providers and particularly FE colleges are likely to need additional support to resource their English and maths departments, and attract and train top quality teachers.

Recommendation 6

Additional support needs to be made available to FE providers to allow them to fully meet the needs of 16-18 learners with below average academic attainment. In particular, additional financial support should be allocated to institutions working with a large proportion of young people with below average academic attainment in recognition of the high level of support these students require and the challenge faced by the FE sector of recruiting high quality English and maths teachers.

Ideally, greater numbers of young people should achieve the benchmark grades at the first attempt. Further measures must be taken to improve GCSE results in schools. If the situation does not improve with new initiatives and the provision of greater resources perhaps more drastic measures will need to be taken. Reforming the 14-19 phase of education has previously been advocated by the Skills Commission and others such as the Lords Social Mobility Committee and the CBI. Policy Exchange has also recently proposed that schools should have to pay a 'Resit Levy' to cover the cost of a learner's retakes and make reparation for their failure to ensure the learner achieved benchmark grades.²¹

¹⁹ Association of Colleges (May, 2014), 'College Funding and Finance', p. 2, available at:

https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/College%20Funding%20and%20Finance%201%20May%202014%20FINAL_0_0.pdf

²⁰ BIS (2014), 'Further Education Workforce Strategy: The Government's Strategy to Support Workforce Excellence in Further Education', p. 8-10, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/326000/bis-14-679-further-education-workforce-strategy-the-government-strategy-support-workforce-excellence-in-further-education.pdf

²¹ N Porter, 'Crossing the Line', p. 14

3 16-18 PROGRESSION

3.1. Post-16 Options

Over the course of the last parliament, various policies and qualification reforms, many introduced as a result of the Wolf Review of Vocational Education, have wrought a number of changes to the post-16 education and training system.

While further proposals for change are anticipated in the Skills White Paper, and from the recommendations of the Lord Sainsbury's review of technical and vocational education pathways, it is worth outlining the main pathways currently open to those leaving Key Stage 4.

At 16 most learners enter FE and sixth form colleges (47% of the cohort in 2013/14) and school sixth forms (39%).²² Since September 2015 changes to the school participation age require that all young people aged 16-18 must be in one of the following forms of education or training:

1. Staying in full-time education
2. Starting an Apprenticeship or Traineeship
3. Working or volunteering (for 20 hours or more a week) while in part-time education or training²³

The main pathways and related qualifications open to learners are displayed on the following page.

²² DfE (2016), 'Destinations of Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 Students in State-Funded and Independent Institutions, England: 2013/14', p. 5, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/493181/SFR052016_Text.pdf

²³ Gov.Uk, 'School Leaving Age'

Fig.1. Qualification Pathways and Progression

Education and training options from 16 (under Study Programme framework)



Further options beyond compulsory education and training



It is expected that the Lord Sainsbury's Review of technical and professional education will propose significant changes to post-16 pathways including a clear division between the academic pathway, 15 technical and professional routes and apprenticeship options. Until these reforms are implemented the above depicts the major options open to young people continuing studying and training in the education and skills system.

3.2 Unsatisfactory Rates of Progression

In addition to the Commission's concerns regarding GCSEs and GCSE retake success rates, the Commission has heard alarming evidence around the lack of progression made by many young people with below average attainment between the ages of 16 and 18.

Longitudinal analysis of Individual Learner Records, in the National Pupil Database, undertaken by the Centre for Vocational Education Research (CVER) reveals a disappointing picture. The study followed young people in the 2010 GCSE cohort for four years up to the age of 20. The study tracked their progress through various education and training pathways and the levels and qualifications achieved.

At age 17, almost a third of this cohort, 28.3%, had not progressed beyond a Level 2 qualification and were instead studying towards a qualification at Level 2 or below. Of the third who weren't studying towards a Level 3 by age 17, the Commission heard that only half would progress onto a higher level qualification. This suggests that many Level 2 qualifications taken during 16-18 education or training are neither being used as, nor acting as, a stepping stone qualification into higher level education or training.

The data also revealed that 10.9% of the cohort was only studying towards a Level 1 or Entry Level qualification at the age of 17, a 0.5% increase of the same cohort at age 16.²⁴ Ofsted highlighted this poor rate of progress saying that 'too many learners did not progress to a higher level of study from their prior attainment to meet their educational and career aspirations. This is particularly so for learners below Level 3'.²⁵

The lack of progression demonstrated in this survey supports the findings in the Wolf Review of large numbers of young people that 'churn' between qualifications. This was described to the Commission as '*portfolio building*' where young people build up a number of equivalent qualifications, rather than completing a qualification and proceeding to progress onto a higher level qualification.

It is unclear what the main factor driving this lack of progress has been. Funding incentives, a lack of technical content at Key Stage 4 meaning learners have to

²⁴ CVER research, LSE, Table 1

²⁵ Ofsted (2014), 'Transforming 16-19 Education and Training: the Early Implementation of 16-19 Study Programmes', p. 6, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transforming-16-to-19-education-and-training-the-early-implementation-of-16-to-19-study-programmes>

start from scratch on vocational courses, and poor careers information, advice and guidance were all cited to the Commission as possible causes.

Either way, progression from qualifications below Level 3 is a particular problem, especially for young people who do not achieve the 5+ A*-C GCSEs benchmark, with English and maths at the age of 16. Whereas, 73.2% of young people who reached the benchmark at 16 achieved a Level 3 qualification at 18, only 10.3% of young people who did not achieve a grade C in GCSE English and maths went on to achieve a level 3 qualification before their 19th birthday.²⁶

The CVER data cited here follows a cohort between 16-20 prior to the raising of the participation age, a review of SFA funded qualifications, and the introduction of the Study Programmes recommended in the Wolf Report. The Commission welcomes many of the efforts taken in the last parliament to reform the FE system to improve progression rates and will be keen to monitor the impact of these reforms through future analysis of the Individual Learner Records.

The Skills Commission supports the call by the House of Lords Social Mobility Committee for the government to adopt a transition framework for school to work transitions, a framework that is explicit in its aim to get as many people who can,

Recommendation 7

BIS and DfE should adopt the transition framework outlined in the Lords Social Mobility report.

up to a Level 3 qualification by the time they leave education or training.²⁷ The Skills Commission recommends:

In such a system, close collaboration between schools and FE providers would be crucial. From the age of 14 a tailored learning pathway for each student would be identified requiring schools, colleges and training providers to deliver the best curriculum possible and the most appropriate learning experience for each young person.

²⁶ CVER research, LSE, Table 4

²⁷ House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility (May, 2016), 'Overlooked and Left Behind: Improving the Transition from School to Work for the Majority of Young People', p. 106-108, available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldsocmob/120/120.pdf>

4 APPRENTICESHIPS

4.1. Apprenticeships 16-18

Apprenticeships are set to become an increasingly important part of the technical, professional and vocational training offer available to young people. As noted by Professor Wolf in her review of vocational learning ‘those who secure an employer-based Apprenticeship generally find that it has substantial positive outcomes’ in comparison to some Level 2 qualifications.²⁸

The Skills Commission has long championed Apprenticeships as an engaging pathway providing young people with a clear and direct line of sight to employment. Indeed, for young people who are less academically inclined, work-based learning offers an appealing opportunity through which they can further their career aims whilst developing an appreciation for learning and the value of numeracy and literacy in the workplace.

While Apprenticeships appeal to a growing cross section of young people they are also particularly attractive to many young people with below average academic attainment, over classroom based learning.

Past evidence presented to the Education Select Committee has indicated that young people with low attainment are much more likely to want to follow an Apprenticeship compared to those with above average attainment. The research found that a quarter of young people in the lowest academic attaining quartile were ‘very likely’ to attempt to enter into an Apprenticeship while 56.4% were ‘likely’ and ‘very likely’ to apply. These figures contrasted significantly with the proportions of those from the highest attaining and second highest attaining quartiles, with only 2.3% and 6.8% respectively indicating they would be ‘very likely’ to take an Apprenticeship.²⁹

In the course of taking evidence for this inquiry the Commission heard several concerns regarding Apprenticeships expansion in relation to young people with below average academic attainment.

²⁸ A Wolf (2011), ‘Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report’, p.51, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf

²⁹ P Croll, G Attwood (2014), ‘House of Commons Select Committee on Education: Inquiry into Apprenticeships and Traineeships for 16-19 Year Olds: Notes on Progression into Apprenticeships: Early Intentions and later outcomes’, p. 4

16-18 Apprenticeships

School Leavers Apprenticeships

The number of young people following an Apprenticeship after KS4 is small – only 5% of the cohort in 2013/14 – a proportion unchanged since 2010/11.³⁰ It is anticipated that this proportion will grow as the government strives to meet its target of 3 million Apprenticeship starts by 2020.³¹

The Growth of 16-18 Apprenticeships

Data indicates that over the course of this parliament young people will account for an increasing proportion of Apprenticeship starts. The table below shows how the proportion of young people starting Apprenticeships is growing.

AGE Grant

Employers with fewer than 50 employees who are recruiting their first apprentice, aged 16-24, in the last 12 months are eligible to apply for the Apprenticeship Grant for Employers (AGE). Employers awarded AGE receive payment of £1,500 once a qualifying apprentice completes 13 weeks ‘in-learning’ on their programme.

Table 4: Apprenticeship Starts by Age³²

		Academic Year		
		2013/14	2014/15	2015/16 (August-January)
Percentage of Apprenticeship starts by age	18 & below	27.1%	25.1%	33.4%
	18+	72.8%	74.7%	66.5%

4.2. Quality and Breadth

There are fears within the sector that the government’s drive to deliver 3 million Apprenticeship starts by 2020 may have a detrimental impact on the quality of Apprenticeship provision. While effective enforcement of standards may make many of these concerns unwarranted, vigilance is needed as younger apprentices

³⁰ DfE, ‘Destinations of Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 Students’, p. 5

³¹ HM Government (2015), ‘English Apprenticeships: Our 2020 Vision’, available at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/482754/BIS-15-604-english-apprenticeships-our-2020-vision.pdf

³² FE Data Library: Apprenticeships, ‘Apprenticeships Geography, Equality & Diversity and Sector Subject Area: Starts: 2002/03 to 2015/16 Reported to Date’, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-apprenticeships>

may be less aware of their rights in employment and the expectations on all parties involved in delivering the Apprenticeship.

As the number of young people taking Apprenticeships increases, there remain questions about the capacity of the mechanisms designed to police the quality of new Apprenticeships. A recently leaked document, titled *BIS 2020 – Finance and Headcount outline*, indicates that the Institute for Apprenticeships (IFA) will be staffed by only 40 employees in 2016/17 and will not employ more staff for the following three years.³³ If this is the case, it seems unlikely that the IFA will be able to effectively scrutinise the quality of the hundreds of thousands of new Apprenticeship starts each year. If quality is not properly guaranteed the government risks undermining the effectiveness, reputation and quality of Apprenticeships.

There are also fears that employer provision of Apprenticeships is not of an adequate standard. As of May 27th, 2016, a quarter of employers inspected under Common Inspection Framework have been awarded the lowest possible pass rating of Grade 3. In comparison, the independent training providers who have been inspected averaged a Grade 2.³⁴ The Commission is concerned that the drive towards employer provision of training/Apprenticeships is not being matched by adequate oversight of depth and quality of provision.

Recommendation 8

The government must make sure that the bodies responsible for oversight are properly equipped to guarantee the quality and effectiveness of Apprenticeships and ensure Apprenticeship outcomes are effectively monitored and evaluated.

Aside from the quality of the learning experience and suitability of some workplaces for young people, the importance of ensuring breadth and a rounded educational experience for 16-18 year olds was raised by many witnesses. This is particularly important as increased numbers of young people are expected to be enrolling on Apprenticeships.

Past criticism of Apprenticeships often centred on some being too role and company specific and not always giving young people the transferable skills and general competencies they need. Given the changing nature of the contemporary economy and labour market, if Apprenticeships are to sustain themselves as a trusted brand for school leavers, their content and wider offer must prepare young people for entering a labour market in which they are likely to have several careers or, at least, work for a number of different organisations.

³³ FE Week (2016), 'Fears IFA Won't Have the Staff to Police Standards', available at: <http://feweek.co.uk/2016/05/02/fears-ifa-wont-have-the-staff-to-police-standards/>

³⁴ FE Week (2016), 'Employers Told to Stick to 'Core Business' After Citroën Blow', p. 4, available at: http://feweek.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/FE-Week-176-digi.pdf?mc_cid=dbf77387a5&mc_eid=3b10a88792

Further to this, contributors also expressed concerns regarding a lack of extra-curricular and enrichment activities available to young people undertaking an Apprenticeship. Access to a broad range of extra-curricular activities is often seen as a key benefit and one integral to the development of sixth-form and university students. Learners enrolled at FE colleges and those working for larger employers or with good training providers can benefit from opportunities to take part in team sports, be part of a wider civic community, or professional network, and access pastoral services in times of need. Such facilities and opportunities help young people to develop a broad range of skills and can be a formative part of a young person's development.

As Apprenticeships expand amongst this age group, as well as amongst young people with below average academic attainment, it is important to ensure that 16-18 apprentices are not socially and professionally isolated and have access to similar benefits as their peers on other learning pathways.

Recommendation 9

The IFA should consider how young apprentices can access the social, professional and pastoral networks and services their peers in colleges, sixth forms or universities have.

4.3. Pre-Apprenticeship Training

While many we spoke to were positive about Apprenticeships for 16-18 year-olds, the importance of pre-Apprenticeship training was often raised. In particular, discussion centred on preparing young people for the workplace and how best to enable other learners to take on an advanced Apprenticeship over an intermediate level Apprenticeship.

While many young people will flourish in the workplace, expanding Apprenticeships will mean greater numbers of young people becoming apprentices who are yet to develop the required behaviours and attitudes they will need to thrive in the workplace. Such instances could result in the apprentice not completing their Apprenticeship or making employers wary of taking on 16-18 year olds.

With this in mind it is important that adequate provision is made to ensure that young people entering Apprenticeships have reached the level of maturity required to gain the benefits of the programme. Young people must be prepared for what will be expected of them as apprentices, a demanding role where they will be both employees and independent learners. This is a significant step-up for school pupils.

Traineeships

Introduced in 2013, Traineeships are courses comprised of a work experience placement and maths and English support where necessary. They can last up to six months and are aimed at young people aged 16-24 who are unemployed, qualified below Level 3, or have little work experience. Traineeships are intended to prepare young people for work or an apprenticeship. Trainees are not paid but may receive expenses.

Uptake

- In 2013/14 there were 7,000 Traineeship starts by young people aged under 19
- In 2014/15 there were 11,600 Traineeship starts by young people aged under 19

Although the number of Traineeship starts is growing, only a very small number of young people aged under-19 follow a Traineeship.

Pre-Apprenticeship Training

Recently, the effectiveness of Traineeships as a route into an Apprenticeship has been questioned. In 2014/15, out of 7,400 Traineeship completions by those aged under 19, only 2,280, or 31%, progressed into an Apprenticeship.

Outcomes

The outcomes achieved by those completing a Traineeship have been largely positive. In 2013/14, these outcomes were:

- 22% were on an Apprenticeship
- 28% were in work
- 17% were in training or education

While:

- 26% were looking for work after finishing or leaving their Traineeships
- 7% were doing something else

Recent data reveals that 5,400, out of 7,400, Trainees aged under-19 who completed their Traineeship in 2014/15 achieved a positive progression (e.g. moving into a job, Apprenticeship, or further full-time education).

Access to pre-Apprenticeship training is particularly important for young people with below average academic attainment. These young people often lack the basic competencies and soft skills needed to access Apprenticeships. Furthermore, without adequate pre-Apprenticeship provision, these young people will struggle to take full advantage of the opportunities available to them during an Apprenticeship.

Pre-Apprenticeship training may take many forms, ranging from formal college based study and work experience through to small steps provision and schemes such as Traineeships. Given the risks posed to the success of Apprenticeship programmes by starting some young people too early, the Commission recommends that lessons are taken from the Traineeship programme, which, working with some particularly hard to reach groups, has yielded some positive results regarding progression rates into Apprenticeships, further training and employment.

Beyond preparing young people for Apprenticeships and the workplace, readying young people for the right level of study must take precedence over raising Apprenticeship starts.

The Commission shares the concerns of the Lords Social Mobility Committee, that current reforms risk reducing post-16 options to Apprenticeships or HE.³⁵ A pathway which combines college study and an Apprenticeship beginning at 17 or 18 may be an effective way to expand post-16 options and address some of the potential consequences of the government's drive to reach the 3 million target. Such an option could allow for further general study prior to starting an Apprenticeship, help learners develop to a stage where they can start an advanced Apprenticeship and give apprentices greater access to social, professional and pastoral networks and facilities.

Recommendation 10

BIS and the DfE should consult with employers and providers on what a pre-Apprenticeship year of general education and training might look like.

³⁵ House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility, 'Overlooked and Left Behind', p.7

5 CAREERS IAG

5.1. Making the Right Decisions

The careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) available to young people is, and has been for a long time, poor and ineffective.

The Commission strongly believes that, if delivered well, IAG gives young people the opportunity to make informed decisions about their futures. In order to do so, IAG needs to help young people understand the skills and qualifications they need to achieve their aspirations and build their understanding of the various education, training and career pathways available to them.

It is particularly important to ensure that high-quality IAG is available to young people with below average academic attainment, a group whose future employment prospects are uncertain particularly in a labour market subject to disruption caused by automation, high levels of migration and graduate under-employment.

The poor quality of the existing IAG is illustrated by a recent City & Guilds report which found that, when young people were asked how they had heard about their ideal job: 30% responded, 'we learned about it in a class in school/college'; and, worryingly, only 14% replied saying 'a careers advisor recommended it'.³⁶

The IAG regarding technical, professional and vocational pathways must be improved. These pathways are the least understood and least explained to young people. Increasing the uptake of technical, professional and vocational training pathways is crucial to developing a labour force equipped to meet the growing skills needs within the economy. The IAG on offer must reflect this.

5.2. Careers IAG in Schools (Up-To 16)

Evidence given to the Commission over the course of this inquiry has underlined the particular problem of ineffective careers IAG in schools. The careers guidance available to young people up to 16 is not adequately preparing them to make informed, rational decisions about post-16 education and training pathways.

³⁶ City & Guilds (2015), 'Great Expectations: Teenagers' Career Aspirations Versus the Reality of the UK Jobs Market', p.11, available at: http://www.cityandguilds.com/~/_media/Documents/Courses-and-Quals/Apprenticeships/EMS1%20reports/cggreatexpectationsonline%20pdf.ashx

The Commission spoke to young people learning in FE colleges about their experiences in school, in college and how they transitioned between the two. One student described how, ‘In school I never got told of any other colleges... the only [post-16] education I got told about was the sixth-form’. Similar experiences were relayed by others in the groups we spoke to. Many of the young people explained how their schools had heavily implied that they would be able to attend the sixth-form. For example: ‘I was told I was guaranteed a spot at the sixth-form’, said one student.

‘In school I never got told of any other colleges... the only [post-16] education I got told about was the sixth-form’

They told us how; because they were given the impression that there was a space in sixth-form guaranteed for them, they felt there was no need to consider alternative options. These young people described feeling shocked and abandoned when, upon receiving below average GCSE results, they were informed that they would not be allowed into the sixth-form.

‘When I got my GCSEs a teacher took me into a room and told me I couldn’t come to sixth-form, they didn’t really tell me what I can do... it was like ‘you’re not my problem anymore, just go, you’re not wanted.’”

The Commission is concerned that the careers IAG young people are given in schools is proving inadequate, and, in many cases, seems to be counterproductive – actively directing young people down unsuitable post-16 pathways.

Recommendation 11

Government and schools must recognise the importance of careers IAG and work to improve the IAG offer available to young people. Funding should be allocated to facilitate this.

5.3. Sixth Form Recruitment and IAG

The Commission has heard how, during pre-16 education, young people are pushed towards traditional post-16 routes (A Levels) delivered in sixth-forms. School retention policies need to recognise that some learners will be able to better access their potential and excel, outside of a sixth form, in a vocational learning environment.

There are a Number of Reasons Why Young People are Pushed Towards Traditional Post 16 Pathways:

Funding incentives

It makes sense that, in a marketplace where funding follows individual students, institutions providing post-16 education and training will compete to attract each learner – and the corresponding funding package.

Many schools have an attached sixth-form offer, it is therefore in schools' interests to try and retain students, and the attached package of funding, through post-16 education; even if this is not in the best interest of the individual learner. There is no incentive for schools to give learners careers IAG on competing post-16 education and training pathways and institutions – such as FE colleges.

The road less taken

School teachers and staff members are typically products of traditional educational routes. As such, they are not best placed to promote the opportunities and benefits of technical, professional and vocational pathways. In contrast, teachers and school staff are well equipped to promote traditional post-16 pathways, which they are often most familiar with and have usually experienced themselves.

Pull factors

Some sixth-forms are incentivising students to attend their institution. The incentives offered range from financial benefits, to free technology – such as tablet computers – being given to new students. Although there are legitimate reasons why students are offered these incentives – for example, technology can significantly enhance a student's learning experience – the Commission is concerned that incentives are increasingly being used in the wrong way.

If incentives are being used as a 'signing-on bonus' to entice students to a choose a certain education or training institution over another, then they risk distorting the student's decision making process, making it more difficult for learners to make rational decisions about their post-16 education and training.

The Commission fears that aggressive retention policies have led to schools not fulfilling their obligation to provide impartial information on post-16 options and careers guidance, as outlined by the DfE:

'Careers guidance must be presented in an impartial manner and promote the best interests of the pupils to whom it is given. Careers guidance must also include

information on all options available in respect of 16-18 education and training, including Apprenticeships and other work-based education and training.’³⁷

Research has highlighted the corrosive nature of sixth form recruitment policies. Past work by the Institute of Education (IoE) has found high rates of learners dropping out of sixth form. In one instance, the IoE research indicates that up to 31% of young people in the study sample were leaving sixth form during or at the end of year 12.³⁸ Dropping out of and restarting post-16 learning leaves young people with less time to progress and achieve important qualifications.

‘Careers guidance must be presented in an impartial manner and promote the best interests of the pupils to whom it is given’

Young people who drop out of sixth forms and switch into the college sector put pressure on the already stretched resources of FE. Providers have less time to work with these young people in the 16-18 window (the importance of which is explained in section 7.1) and often bring with them challenges developed in their previous educational career, such as: disengagement, poor English and maths attainment, and low confidence and self-esteem.

Aggressive retention and recruitment practices in schools and sixth-forms and the lack of effective careers IAG has made it difficult for young people with below average academic attainment to choose which post-16 pathways they are best suited to and will be best served in. These young people suffer from some of the poorest life outcomes. Accordingly, the Commission is alarmed to hear that young people are often pushed into unsuitable post-16 pathways, despite their individual needs and skills.

5.4. Careers IAG & Apprenticeships

Young people with below average academic attainment are more likely to want to choose to follow an Apprenticeship; however, below average academic attainment will adversely affect their ability to do so.

‘It’s [Apprenticeships] not explained properly to people’

None of the young people in our focus group were training on an Apprenticeship, but many had considered applying for one. A number of common issues were

³⁷ Ofsted (2013), ‘Going in the Right Direction?: Careers Guidance in Schools from September 2012’, p.8, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413171/Going_in_the_right_direction.pdf

³⁸ A Hodgson, K Spours (2013), ‘Middle Attainers and 14-19 Progression in England: Half-Served by New Labour and now Overlooked by the Coalition?’, p.9, available at: <http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/11987/>

cited by the young people as the reasons why they eventually decided against applying for an Apprenticeship, these were:

1. A lack of careers IAG available on Apprenticeship pathways
2. Not fully understanding what training on an Apprenticeship would entail
3. Being put-off applying by a confusing, difficult navigate, application process

One young person described the thinking behind their decision not to apply for an Apprenticeship, saying: ‘I was thinking of an Apprenticeship before I started this course [at an FE college] ... but it was just the whole method of finding one... was more complicated than just signing onto a course and doing a course [at college]’

These sentiments were reflected by comments made by many of the other young people, such as, ‘It’s [Apprenticeships] not explained properly to people’, and, ‘I didn’t really know about it [Apprenticeships]’.

5.5. Implementing Change

‘Schools are currently not penalised if they keep someone on for an A Level programme that is not appropriate for them’

More needs to be done to encourage schools, colleges and alternative training providers to work together, rather than compete against one another, to ensure that young people possess the necessary information to make the right post-16 choices. The Commission welcomes the Minister of State for Skills, Nick Boles MP’s recent comments underlining how the aggressive student retention and recruitment practices of schools and sixth-forms need to be addressed: ‘schools are currently not penalised if they keep someone on for an A Level programme that is not appropriate for them’.³⁹

Recommendation 12

To better support young people with below average academic attainment, DfE and BIS must address the aggressive student recruitment and retention practices of schools and sixth-forms - learners must be made aware of all the different post-16 pathways available to them, including Apprenticeships.

³⁹TES (2016), ‘Nick Boles: Schools Could be Penalised for Enrolling Students on A Levels that are ‘not appropriate’’, available at: <https://www.tes.com/news/further-education/breaking-news/nick-boles-schools-could-be-penalised-enrolling-students-a>

6 AGE OR STAGE?

6.1. Rigidity vs. Flexibility

In examining how the education and training system serves those with below average academic attainment, tensions between age and stage became a familiar theme. The Commission feels that our skills system, and many young people, would benefit from a more flexible approach centred on the learner's development rather than date of their birth.

In providing evidence to the Commission the NUS gave a student perspective on 16-18 education and training. The NUS underlined the diversity of the 16-18 cohort. They highlighted differences between learners from varied socio-economic, cultural and geographic backgrounds as well as significant variations in levels of personal maturity and educational development. While some learners will be more independent, mature and ambitious at 16, others may be less advanced in their maturity, or less clear on their future for any number of reasons that do not necessarily impinge their capacity.

As well as acknowledging that young people develop at different rates, there is also a need to accept that many young people have complicated lives which can disrupt their education. Ideally the education and training system should be flexible enough to allow people the space to try new things or come back from 'failure' rather than cutting off opportunity if a student hasn't reached a certain level by a fixed date.

While there are many factors associated with a learner's personal circumstances that may influence their progress through education and training, there are also problems in the system, which have a negative impact on the progression and experience of many learners.

A lack of support at Key Stage 4, poor careers information, advice and guidance, funding incentives for schools, and limited access to technical education at Key Stage 4, can all potentially delay a learner's progress. Young people may be ill advised about their options or stay on at sixth form when it might not be right for them. Other able learners may have to enrol on Level 2 courses to gain technical competencies not developed at GCSE level.

The college students we spoke to as part of a focus group mentioned peers who had enrolled on A Level courses with their school sixth forms, only to drop out after performing badly on courses they said were not right for them. While such negative experiences were described as a 'waste of time' by the students, who also spoke of the demotivation it caused amongst their peers, such experiences have further negative implications.

Funding for fulltime students aged 18+ is 17.5% less compared to the funding available for students aged 16 and 17. This funding discrepancy is detrimental to providers who work with learners who have been ill advised about their course of study, or those who may require three years rather than two to complete learning programmes and achieve qualifications. The reduced funding can affect the type of provision on offer and encourage providers to 'shoe horn' some learners into two-year courses which 'may mean more students failing or simply dropping out of education', according to the Association of School and College Leaders.⁴⁰

6.2. Tailored Learning Programmes: the Future?

Interestingly, the Department for Education has introduced greater flexibility to the school starting age in acknowledgement of the varied stages of development between summer born and autumn born children in the same school cohort. In an attempt to combat the impact of age on life outcomes, guidance introduced in 2014 gave parents the ability to delay the primary school start date of their child if: they were born in the summer (1st April to 31st August) or the parent/carer does not think they are ready to start in the September after they turn four.⁴¹

While this is a positive move for parents concerned about their child's level of development, it would be good to see greater consideration of the varying stages of learners' development later in the education system. As we have seen 'life' events, often beyond a young person's control, or early inequalities can mean learners losing out on opportunities to progress their learning and gain the qualifications and competencies they need by 18.

The Skills Commission would like to see similar principles of flexibility applied to the 14+ education and training system. These principles, partnered with protecting Level 1 and 2 qualifications as a legitimate pathway to Level 3, would incentivise learners who are currently underserved by the system to progress. This could better engage and develop the learners who are currently underserved by the system.

⁴⁰ BBC (2013), 'Vulnerable Students will be Hit by Cuts for 18-year-olds', available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-25348180>

⁴¹ Gov.Uk, 'Schools Admissions', available at: <https://www.gov.uk/schools-admissions/applying>

The raising of the participation age to 18 allows us to think more creatively about what a flexible, yet rigorous, education and training system might look like. In his New Year speech for 2015, John Cridland, the former Director General of the CBI called for the ‘abolition of GCSEs at 16’ and their replacement by ‘*tailored learning plans*’ for 14 to 18-year-olds.⁴² Similarly, the Lords Social Mobility Committee has also made a similar call for ‘the national curriculum to stop at 14 rather than 16, and for a new 14-19 transition stage to be developed’.⁴³

Recommendation 13

The government must develop more flexible transition frameworks that account for learners’ different rates of development.

The Commission also heard how fully embracing new and emerging technologies in teaching and learning could help young people, and those at risk of below average academic attainment in particular, take full advantage of their time in education and training. Technology offers providers the opportunity to personalise learning provision according to the distinct learning needs, interests and aspirations of individual learners. The growth of technology as an educational tool is the logical extension of the proliferation of technology into daily lives of young people.

⁴² FE Week (2014), ‘CBI Director General Cridland Call for GCSE ‘Abolition’ with Participation Age Rising to 18’, available at: <http://feweek.co.uk/2014/12/30/cbi-director-general-cridland-calls-for-gcse-abolition-with-participation-age-rising-to-18/>

⁴³ House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility, ‘Overlooked and Left Behind’, p.9

7 A QUESTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

7.1. Social Justice

The issue of social justice has pervaded all aspects of this inquiry. Below average academic attainment is not simply an educational problem, it is both a symptom, and driver, of the lack of social mobility experienced by many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to fail to gain benchmark grades at GCSE. Those young people who do not achieve benchmark GCSEs will face a host of challenges throughout their time in education and training, and latterly in their professional careers. The Commission is concerned that not enough is being done to address the stark structural inequalities within the education and training sector.

7.2. Vulnerable Groups

Young people from certain disadvantaged groups are particularly vulnerable to below average academic attainment. Socio-economic background and childhood experiences greatly influence the likelihood of a young person achieving the benchmark grades in their GCSEs. For example:

- Children in care traditionally have terribly poor academic outcomes. In 2014, only 14% of looked after children in Year 11 achieved 5+ GCSEs at A*-C, including English and maths⁴⁴
- White British boys eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) are one of the worst performing groups at GCSE. In 2015, only 24% of white British boys known to be eligible for FSM achieved 5+ GCSEs at A*-C, including English and maths⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Y Zayed, R Harker (2015), 'Children in Care in England: Statistics', p.6, available at: <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN04470#fullreport>

⁴⁵ DfE (2016), 'Revised GCSE and Equivalent Results in England: 2014 to 2015', p. 24 available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/494073/SFR01_2016.pdf

- Economic disadvantage negatively impacts academic outcomes. In 2015, only 33.1% of young people eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) achieved 5+ GCSEs at A*-C (or equivalent), including English and maths⁴⁶
- Young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) perform poorly at GCSE. In 2015, only 20% of SEN pupils achieved 5+ GCSEs at A*-C, including English and maths⁴⁷

The above list is by no means exhaustive and there is often cross over between the different groups.

It is unacceptable that such a small proportion of young people belonging to vulnerable groups successfully achieve benchmark attainment at GCSE. Below average attainment has a significant and long-term negative impact on a young person's education, training and employment outcomes.

7.3. Disadvantaged Young People: Outcomes

Economically disadvantaged young people, measured using eligibility for FSM, make up a significant cohort within the education and training sector. In 2015, the proportion of young people up to aged 16, in all forms of education and known to be eligible for and claiming FSM was 15.2%.⁴⁸

FSM: Unclaimed Eligibility

The total number of young people eligible for FSM is likely to be considerably higher than the DfE FSM figure suggests. FSM must be applied for by schools and families on a per-pupil basis; the DfE has found that a large number of eligible young people are not applying for FSM. In 2012, 14% of pupils entitled to FSM were found to be not claiming.⁴⁹

Failure to apply for FSM means that eligible families do not receive the financial relief FSM provides. It also means that FSM eligible young people miss out on the benefits of FSM and do not get the additional support FSM entitlement entails, namely through the pupil premium.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ DfE, 'Revised GCSE and Equivalent Results in England', p. 18

⁴⁷ DfE, 'Revised GCSE and Equivalent Results in England', p.23

⁴⁸ DfE, 'Revised GCSE and Equivalent Results in England', p. 18

⁴⁹ S Iniesta-Martinez, H Evans (2012), 'Pupils Not claiming Free School Meals', p. 1, available at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183380/DFE-RR235.pdf

⁵⁰ Education Funding Agency (2016), 'Pupil Premium 2015 to 2016: Conditions of Grant', available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium-2015-to-2016-allocations/pupil-premium-2015-to-2016-conditions-of-grant>

The Commission is concerned that disadvantaged young people are disproportionately less likely to achieve benchmark grades at GCSE compared to their peers. In 2015, 66.9% of young people entitled to and receiving FSM did not achieve the benchmark GCSE grades.⁵¹

Given that over two-thirds of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not achieve benchmark GCSEs, it is worrying that only 10.3% of young people not achieving a grade C in GCSE English and maths go on to achieve a Level 3 qualification before their 19th birthday.⁵² Failure to achieve a Level 3 qualification has a significant and negative impact on a young person's future prospects.

Recommendation 14

Government and training providers must increase the support available to help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds access their potential. In particular, government must do more to encourage uptake of FSM so that FSM eligible young people are able to access the support they are entitled to.

7.4. Wage Premiums

The negative effects of disadvantage and the associated poor academic outcomes are perpetuated throughout the education and training system and the labour market.

Young people who do not have opportunities for progression and achievement of appropriate qualifications do not benefit from the significant earning premiums which increase relative to the level of qualification held. In 2014 the Social Market Foundation calculated these earnings premiums as:

- The average earnings premium attached to a Level 3 qualification compared to a Level 2 qualification is 9.6%.
- The average earnings premium attached to a Level 2 qualification compared to a Level 1 qualification is 7.9%.
- The average earnings premium attached to a Level 1 qualification compared to no qualification at all is 9.7%⁵³

Failure to move up through qualifications jeopardises a learner's future earnings potential and, for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, risks

⁵¹ DfE, 'Revised GCSE and Equivalent Results in England', p. 18

⁵² CVR research, LSE, Table 4

⁵³ N Keohane, C Hupkau (2014), 'Making Progress: Boosting the Skills and Wage Prospects of the Low Paid', p. 31, available at: <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Publication-Making-Progress-Boosting-the-skills-and-wage-prospects-of-the-low-paid.pdf>

perpetuating cycles of disadvantage, low attainment and poor employment outcomes.

7.5. Working for Disadvantaged Young People

Economic disadvantage in childhood is directly linked to a young person's educational outcomes, future employment prospects and earning potential. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has highlighted the 'causal relationship between financial resources and child outcomes'.⁵⁴

The challenges faced by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds make it difficult for them to compete on an equal footing with their more advantaged peers. Research by the JRF shows how 'children growing up in lower income households do less well than their peers on a range of wider outcomes, including measures of health and education'.⁵⁵

'Causal relationship between financial resources and child outcomes'

Although the effects of disadvantage take root early in a child's life, making sure appropriate and high-quality post-16 provision is available will go some way to improving their education, training and labour market prospects.

Further education colleges are the most common post-16 destination for disadvantaged young people; however, the support they offer, in particular to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, is undervalued.⁵⁶ The Commission recognises the conclusion, drawn by the Lords Social Mobility Committee, that 'there is a culture of inequality between vocational and academic routes to work... [which] pervades the system' and has led to young people in the vocational training sector being underserved and unappreciated.

Funding structures have not historically reflected the high level of support required by the many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds learning in the FE sector. They have suffered from being significantly underfunded compared to other post-16 pathways. For example, in 2013/14 a 16-19 year old learner at an FE college was allocated only 54% of the funding allocated to an undergraduate student.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ K Cooper, K Stewart (2013), 'Does Money Affect Children's Outcomes?: A Systemic Review', p. 18, available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/does-money-affect-children%E2%80%99s-outcomes>

⁵⁵ Cooper; Stewart, 'Does Money Affect Children's Outcomes?', p. 8

⁵⁶ Iniesta-Martinez; Evans, 'Pupils Not Claiming Free School Meals', p. 8-9

⁵⁷ G Conlon, M Halterbeck (2015), 'Mind the Gap: Comparing Public Funding in Higher and Further Education: Resource Benchmarking Across Education Sectors in the United Kingdom', p. iv, available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/media/736/London-Economics--final-report-Mind-the-gap-Comparing-public-funding-in-higher-and-further-education-19-Nov-15/pdf/londoneconomics_mindthegap-publicfundinginheandfe_fullreport_nov151.pdf

Until the work of the FE sector is properly appreciated and appropriately funded the sector will continue to struggle to adequately support the many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who seek to use FE institutions to gain the skills and qualifications they need to achieve their ambitions.

‘Children growing up in lower income households do less well than their peers on a range of wider outcomes’

7.6. Social Mobility

The opportunities and support non-disadvantaged young people have access to allow them to outperform young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Childhood disadvantage harms social mobility. Young people from the poorest backgrounds are likely to fare worse economically through their adult lives compared to young people from wealthy backgrounds. They lack the informal support networks – made up of friends and family members – that give their non-disadvantaged peers an advantage. These networks give young people access to pools of careers information, advice and guidance, work experience opportunities and exposure to various career and learning pathways; all of which can significantly help a young person through all stages of education, training and employment.

Research has shown that over half of young people in the highest family income quintile at age 10 are in the top two hourly earning quintiles at age 42; whereas, more than half of young people from the lowest family income quintiles at age 10 are in the bottom two hourly earning quintiles at age 42.⁵⁸

Disadvantage is entrenched and reproduced over time and across generations. Young people born into disadvantage will find it difficult to overcome the legacy of their childhood disadvantage. The Commission is concerned that not enough is being done to push and promote social mobility and is worried that the fight against inequality is losing ground.

Recommendation 15

Government needs to do more to research the significance of childhood disadvantage and measure its impact on a young person’s life outcomes in order to understand better how to combat its effects.

⁵⁸ A McKnight (2015), ‘Downward Mobility, Opportunity Hoarding and the ‘Glass Floor’’, p. 18, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/447575/Downward_mobility_opportunity_hoarding_and_the_glass_floor.pdf

METHODOLOGY AND STEERING GROUP

Methodology

Scoping for the *Spotlight* inquiry began in late 2015, with work on this report, the first in the series, starting in early 2016.

The findings and policy recommendations herein are based on a review of pertinent literature, evidence given to the Commission by expert witnesses and responses elicited during a focus group for young people held at Kingston College and attended by young people studying at the college.

Three steering group evidence sessions were held between January 2016 and March 2016 to explore and scrutinise key issues and inform and guide the desk based research. The evidence sessions were led by the inquiry Chair Peter Mayhew-Smith.

Steering Group

Inquiry Chair:

Peter Mayhew-Smith	Principal of Kingston College and Carshalton College
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Steering Group:

Heidi Allen MP	Conservative Member of Parliament for South Cambridgeshire
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Shane Chowen	Head of Policy & Public Affairs, Learning and Work Institute
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DEDICATION

This report is dedicated to the memory of Eileen Cavalier OBE (1945-2016), in thanks for the thousands of opportunities she created and the support she gave our sector.

