

POLICY WATCH

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The DfES Green Paper on staying in education and training post 16

It's been a long time coming. It was after all first considered as the troops came home at the end of the First World War but even so this latest attempt to raise the learning participation age to 18 has provoked some curious reactions.

'*Stay at school or go to prison*' roared the headline in the *Metro* on the day that the DfES Green Paper was released. It's not like that of course. As the Education Secretary put it, "we're not going to chain young people to the desk and make them do quadratic equations;" young people could stay on at school but equally carry on learning or training at college, on the job or day release. Equally for some, those working more than 20 hours a week, participation may be part time. In essence, it's about making sure that opportunities for carrying on in some form of learning are readily available. 'Education Asbos' as the *Guardian* dubbed them, let alone jail for refuseniks are way down the end of the big stick.

The case for extending the learning age is, according to this Paper, now well established and of course has been given a reference point in the form of the recent Leitch Report. "*The employment opportunities of the lowest skilled will continue to decline, risking a lost generation, cut off permanently from labour market opportunity*" as he put it. The link between qualification levels and skills remains unproven but there are wider imperatives here. "Those who participate (beyond 16)" the Green Paper argues, "are less likely to experience teenage pregnancy, be involved in crime or behave anti socially." For a society increasingly concerned about its disaffected young people, staying on in some form of learning is quite simply a good thing and to use a word that crops up a lot in this Green Paper, the system must be "galvanised" to make this happen.

In effect the Paper puts forward two propositions. The first, favoured by the Paper as the simplest option, is to legislate for all young people in England to participate in education or training until their 18th birthday. This would be a compulsory requirement but would not apply to those who achieve a Level 3 by age 18 and could be modified for particular community groups as long as the minimum requirement of 280 glh per year (the equivalent of one day a week over the year) was observed. For those employed less than 20 hours a week, participation would be full time, at least 16 glh a week. Participation could be at school, in college, work based learning or accredited training.

The second proposition links participation to achievement levels and proposes that young people should stay in learning until either they reach a Level 2 or age 18 - whichever is the earlier. The worry about this option is that it would be harder to administer and end up a bit more like a punishment - stay in school until you get your work done.



The intention is to consult on these proposals and then to phase in the requirement, starting with the requirement to participate to 17 by 2013 and to 18 by 2015. This would have the advantage of linking in with the national entitlement for 14 - 19 provision also set for 2013. It would mean those starting secondary education in Sept 2008 would be the first to be expected to stay on beyond 16.

So far so good but what about the implementation? A number of issues spring to mind here of which perhaps three stand out.

The first is about the qualification offer as it is currently expressed. The Paper sets out the familiar three pathways, "general classroom based learning, applied work related learning and work based vocational learning." It then goes on to describe changes to the A level and the expansion of the IB, of limited relevance perhaps for this Paper but part of the general pathway; 14 - 19 Diplomas, of more relevance and for the applied pathway but yet to be fully realised; and the creation of an Apprenticeship entitlement, also from 2013, for the work based route. It also talks about the Foundation Learning Tier and packages under the Key Stage 4 engagement programme but of existing proprietary vocational qualifications such as BTECs and City and Guilds, there is no mention.

This seems strange. BTECs, for example, have a strong track record in re engaging young people, have grown enormously in schools and are even recognised on the Government's own 'league' tables let alone the UCAS tariff. So what does a good looking qualification need to do to get noticed around here? The Paper professes young people will be able to choose the route that best suits them but it doesn't feel like it on this evidence. This needs addressing.

The second is about whether the infrastructure will be in place to cope with the expected increase in numbers. Given the modelling in the Paper, the numbers may not be huge although their 'personal' needs might. In terms of numbers, the Paper reckons that 5000 more 16/17 year olds than in 2007/8 would be in school by 2013 and 13,000 more in FE if participation was raised to age 17 by that date. And if the participation age was raised to 18 in 2015 that would mean an extra 15,000 in school and 31,000 in FE against 2007/8 numbers.

This suggests that the greater strain will be felt by FE, a view compounded by para 4.43 in the Paper which confirms that the growth in school numbers has already been accounted for "by the planned growth in Academies" but has little to say on how to build capacity in FE. The demographic downturn may ease some of the pressure but given that the accompanying Impact Paper suggests that "an additional £81m will be needed to build new facilities," means that the new joint 14 - 19 capital budget needs skewing towards FE.

The third issue, and the one that has provoked garish headlines, is about the use of compulsion. A sequence of stages is proposed for those who run into difficulties or refuse to engage. Much is supportive including guidance, follow up visits, alternative placements, but it is only after these carrots have been exhausted that the stick is wielded in the form of possible Attendance Orders, Penalty Notices and ultimately due legal process.

The Paper makes a clear case for such compulsion but this still leaves one lingering question - would compulsion be needed if the qualification offer was more widely attractive? Unless the full range, as currently, is offered we'll never know.

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