Raising the Statutory Participation Age

On 10th May 2007, the National Learner Panel met to consider the main recommendations contained within the Green Paper *Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16 from the perspective of the learner.*

Introduction

The central proposal laid out in the paper is that:

- All young people should participate in education or training until their 18th birthday
- Participation could be in school, a college, in work-based learning, or in accredited training provided by an employer
- In order to count as participating, young people would be required to work towards accredited qualifications
- Participation should be full-time for young people not in employment for a significant part of the week, and part-time for those working more than 20 hours a week.

Simon Day (DfES policy lead), gave a presentation in which he laid out the context to the paper, provided an overview of the implications and responded to panel members’ queries during a brief Question and Answer session. The panel then broke into three groups to consider the 3 broad questions outlined below, whilst also addressing the overarching issue of whether participation should become compulsory in the first place.

Qu 1) are the options that the DfES is offering to young people the right ones?
Qu 2) what additional support might young people need?
Qu 3) should there be enforcement mechanisms and, if so, what should they be?

Finally, the groups came back together to share their thoughts and at this point were joined by Bill Rammell (Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education) who listened to their feedback. The panel’s comments are summarised below.
**Should the raising of the participation age be compulsory?**

Our response to this policy has been very mixed – more so than for any other issue we have considered to date. All panel members clearly support the ambition to encourage continuing (and lifelong) learning. However, our opinion is divided as to whether making participation in education or training compulsory is likely to have a successful outcome for individuals. Some feel it could further discourage the hardest to reach, encouraging those who are most at risk of dropping out of education or training to rebel. Others feel it could at least help to stop those most at risk from “slipping through the net.”

We feel that compulsion seems at odds with the ethos of personalisation, and are concerned that there does not seem to be enough time to embed and measure the impact of the new personalisation and improved IAG systems (which seek to encourage voluntary participation by increasing aspirations) before moving towards compulsory measures.

However, we are in full agreement that if this legislation is to deliver real benefits by increasing voluntary participation rates from learners and individuals, it is critical to avoid it being perceived as it as “raising the school-leaving age.” Any media misperceptions or misrepresentations of the reality that is being proposed need to be pro-actively and quickly redressed.

**Qu 1: Are the options for young people that the DfES has outlined in the green paper the right ones?**

We feel that the options seem broad enough to cover most learner or potential learner’s ambitions. However, we feel that at the moment many individuals would potentially struggle to get onto the particular courses that they were interested in (e.g. the apprenticeships courses). If this is going to work as a policy, there has to be an assurance that people will have reasonable access to the courses they want to study.

We are concerned that this policy will struggle to establish its credibility in those careers – e.g. farming – where completing a qualification isn’t currently deemed necessary to demonstrate an individual’s knowledge or ability, or indeed to improve their future employability. A different approach will be needed when positioning ongoing training in these career areas, appealing to professional pride rather than compulsory requirements.

Having agreed that the progression routes outlined on paper seem to cover most relevant options for those of school-leading age, we are still concerned about how this can be positioned, how it can be *sold*, to young people in a way that encourages them to see it as an opportunity, rather than a constraint.
Qu 2: what kind of support is going to be important for young people?

We feel that the following support will be crucial in ensuring that these proposals are implemented successfully:

- High quality, personalised **Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)**. We suggest that services such as Connexions review the particular personnel that handle the IAG for young people – in order for the system to work, they need to be people that young people can connect with. They should consider ways in which they could become more approachable and feel more relevant to an audience of young people (e.g. peer mentoring schemes can be very successful, they could implement their own or link with existing schemes).

- Appropriate **financial support for teenage parents** (e.g. childcare) to allow them to participate flexibly.

- Learning and pastoral support for **learners with learning difficulties and disabilities (LLDD)**. We anticipate this will probably be slightly easier to ensure for those who stay in full-time learning and assume that the support that has been available to them up to 16 will automatically be extended to 18. However, the ongoing learning support that will be required for learners with LLDD who wish to move onto work-based learning and training needs to be looked at carefully – and appropriate funding allocated.

- An **innovative national policy to provide young people aged between 16 and 18 with free transport**. This entitlement would act as a form of incentive, and would be a practical way of supporting all learners, including the most vulnerable.

Qu 3: Should there be enforcement mechanisms, and if so, what should they be?

Again, our opinion is divided on this. Some members feel that without enforceability the policy would be rendered meaningless, because the most vulnerable individuals would be unlikely to participate voluntarily – and therefore participation levels would probably not increase significantly amongst the hardest to reach groups.

However, others of us feel very strongly that (at least for the first few years) there should be a much stronger emphasis on encouragement, incentives and support to participate – and that enforceability should only be introduced once other proposed improvements have had a chance to become properly embedded. These panel members feel that enforcement mechanisms should be introduced only if it is proved that, over a sustained period, these approaches (couple with improved IAG and a more personalised approach) are failing to raise the levels of participation voluntarily.

In either case, we are all in agreement that enforcement should clearly be the final resort and that even then it would be essential to take into account an individual’s circumstances before any punitive measures were taken (e.g. family circumstances, availability, financial circumstances etc).
Our recommendations for disincentives

If enforcement is finally to be introduced at some future stage, we would be very wary of imposing such measures as imprisonment and fines. These will only place the hardest to reach groups at risk of even further financial and social disadvantage. However, the policy could be supported by implementing a range of disincentives such as:

- a reduction in benefits for individuals who (repeatedly, and after all extenuating circumstances had been taken into account) refuse to participate
- a requirement to participate in community service for those who (repeatedly, and after all extenuating circumstances had been taken into account) refuse to participate.

In these circumstances, we would recommend an innovative approach to community service that is likely to promote a more positive attitude towards education and training opportunities in future e.g. accreditation when it is successfully undertaken.

The suggestions we outline above would be very much a last resort, and we cannot emphasise strongly enough that raising participation is most likely to be achieved by placing an emphasis on incentives rather than disincentives.

Our recommendations for incentives

If participation becomes compulsory, existing initiatives such as the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) will no longer provide the incentive to learn that they do at the moment. Nevertheless, they are invaluable as a means of financial support for many learners. Government will need to look for alternative incentives if they are to encourage a voluntary increase in participation in education and training. It will need to introduce a range of tangible incentives e.g.

- free travel for individuals
- allowances for employers who support their employees in training

and complement these by supporting a network of individuals and organisations that can help to personally motivate individuals e.g.

- learning ambassadors to approach the hardest to reach
- peer mentors (at schools, colleges and in the workplace – including, where possible, jobcentres)

Facts and figures about the extra money earned over the course of a lifetime by those who successfully complete a certain level of qualification might prove a useful spur to some of us. However, if all of us are going to be motivated to voluntarily take part in further education or training at the age of 16, we need to feel that what we are being offered will enable us to achieve our personal aspirations, if we already know what we want to do – or at the very least will help to broaden and open up options, until we’re clearer about the direction that we want to go in.