



RAISING THE PARTICIPATION AGE
Developing an Engaging Offer to
Young People

Summary of findings

April 2011

Background

The National Youth Agency (NYA), in partnership with the Local Government Association, undertook research to explore young people's views on the coalition government's plans to increase the age for young people remaining in education or training – frequently referred to as raising the participation age (RPA). As part of the spending review and the White Paper *The Importance of Teaching*, the government made clear its continued commitment to raising the participation age to 17 in 2013 and to 18 in 2015, in line with the provisions of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The White Paper announced that the government would legislate, through the Education Bill 2011, to allow the enforcement process to be introduced progressively over a longer period (*The Importance of Teaching – the Schools White Paper 2010*, p50). Young people will be able to choose one of three options:

- Full-time education, such as school, college or home education;
- Work-based learning, such as an apprenticeship; and
- Part-time education or training if they are employed, self-employed or volunteering for more than 20 hours a week.

Research methodology

The research had two elements: an analysis of an online survey of around 1,000 young people and 900 parents/carers completed in November 2010, and the results of five focus groups with 80 young people carried out between December 2010 and February 2011. Of these, 44 were male and 36 were female. Just over half (42) were aged 16 to 18, 25 were aged 11 to 15, and 13 were 19 or older. Between them, the five focus groups involved a diverse range of young people, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, an 'accelerated cohort' (year 10 age young people placed into year 11), those with experience of homelessness, young offenders, looked after young people and young people who had not attended or had been excluded from school.

KEY FINDINGS

What do young people and their parents and carers think about staying in education or learning?

Overall, young people were in favour of staying in education or learning up to the age of 18 years: 57% thought this was a good idea. There were higher levels of support amongst parents/carers with two-thirds (66%) thinking that this was a good idea.

However, young people's awareness of the changes to the education leaving age was varied. Some young people were aware of the changes, while others – including those who will be directly affected – had only very limited knowledge. Very few of the young people involved in the focus groups were aware of the full range of potential options. Just over half (55%) of the focus group participants were in favour of raising the age for staying on in education or training to 18; around a quarter (24%) were opposed to it and the remainder (21%) were unsure.

The most appealing learning option for young people between the ages of 16 to 18 was staying in full time education in school. Perhaps surprisingly, a higher number of young people (46%) selected this option than parents/carers (36%), whilst parents/carers were keener on full time employment with training and apprenticeships than young people.

Of those who indicated they wanted to be in full-time employment aged 16 to 18 years, most indicated that this was because they wanted to be earning money and felt that they would still be learning through the work they did.

You would be earning money but at the same time you would be learning all the skills you need to do your job really well. The training would also be more of a hands-on, practical approach. (15yr old female)

Most of those who were in favour of staying on in education and learning stressed the importance of being offered a range of choices. Many young people in the focus groups also said that they would want to learn in an environment where they would be treated more like adults, for instance a further education college rather than school, although others stressed the benefits of staying on in a familiar environment where teachers were known and trusted.

If it wasn't right for them they would have been wasting their time and put themselves under unnecessary pressure. (Female, 16yrs, in school)

What do you young people think are the advantages of staying on in education and learning?

Most young people thought the benefit of staying in learning up to age 18 was that young people would be better educated, including a more in-depth knowledge of specific subjects, more qualifications and be better prepared for university and for working life.

Allows them to specialise at a later date or opens up higher education opportunities. (Male, 19yrs, at university)

Better qualifications, wider circle of friends and better work and communication skills. (Female, 19yrs, not in work or learning)

What do young people think are the disadvantages of staying on in education and learning?

The main disadvantages for young people staying in learning up to the age of 18 years tended to focus on young people staying at school or college and the perception of this being compulsory. Many respondents commented that not everyone is 'academically minded' and many would prefer to gain experience in the workplace or take up an apprenticeship.

It is an awful long time to be in school, people may find it boring and drop out. (Female, 15yrs, in school)

The issue of cost 'to the taxpayer' and of young people 'losing out on earning money' were common responses.

They may hate it and want to earn money straight away. It can be embarrassing to 'sponge' off 'mummy and daddy' at the age of 18!! To reward student... all should get EMA!! (18 year old female in college part-time and working part-time)

Many, but not all, young people feel strongly that the ending of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) will discourage young people from staying on in education, based on their own experience and those of their peers.

What do young people, their parents and carers think are the most effective ways to encourage young people to stay in education and learning up to the age of 18?

The most popular option for encouraging young people to stay in learning was to provide a cash allowance such as the EMA. This was seen as the most popular option by both young people (79%) and parents (70%).

The opportunity to gain more qualifications was the next most popular option (62% of young people, 67% of parents) followed by knowing more about the benefits of staying in learning (59% of young people; 61% of parents) and the opportunity to learn in the workplace (57% of young people; 64% of parents).

Around half of respondents – young people and parents - thought that practical support such as travel expenses and childcare would encourage young people to stay in learning up to 18 years.

The largest discrepancy between young people and parents was around one-to-one support, such as mentoring and guidance. Just over a third (35%) of young people thought one-to-one support would encourage young people to stay in learning, whereas almost half of parents thought this (48%). However, the role of information,

advice and guidance (IAG) was highlighted in the focus groups. Young people highlighted the need for improved IAG about the opportunities available and how they would help them achieve their employment or higher education ambitions. Some young people said that they had not received enough information about the options available and the implications of their choices. Some also indicated that they were not given impartial advice, for instance when schools wanted to retain young people

Young people in the focus groups believed that education should be challenging, interesting and fun. It should use a range of approaches to respond to individual circumstances and learning styles, in a learning environment that makes it clear that they are valued and respected. Specific elements identified as important included being treated as a young adult, being involved in identifying how they learn best, good quality premises and equipment, and smaller classes.

They identified the need for more appropriate and individual support for young people with additional needs or who had struggled at school, offered in a way which did not stigmatise the young people concerned. Schools should foster understanding of the circumstances of specific groups of young people, such as those in care, and actively promote equal opportunities and cultural diversity.

A large majority of young people and parents/carers agreed that volunteering should count as 'participating' and that young people who are doing voluntary work should not be classed as NEET.

What should learning look like?

The research identified a number of key messages in relation to the question 'what would learning look like?'. These include:

- Education should not be a passive process, but should respond to individual learning needs and life experiences. More non-formal learning opportunities should be available including sports and volunteering. Taken together, these approaches should mean that learning can be challenging, interesting and fun.
- Vocational qualifications should have equal status to academic qualifications, and young people should be able to choose from a range of options, including a mix of academic and vocational programmes, at the age of 14. More flexibility is needed, giving young people a chance to change direction if necessary,
- Young people need a learning environment which makes it clear that they are valued and respected as well as ensuring that more appropriate and individual support for vulnerable young people is available.