

NFER Thinks

What the evidence tells us

Key stage 4 policy reform and its potential impact on at-risk young people



This paper, published in parallel with NFER's evidence-based response to the Department for Education's consultation on reform of key stage 4 qualifications, argues that robust evidence from NFER research could help prevent hundreds of thousands of young people from disengaging.

Current policy dialogue is incredibly positive in terms of giving all young people, whatever their background, the chance to succeed, but unless policymakers listen to the research evidence, the opposite may happen.

Ultimately, everyone working in education shares a desire to reduce the number of young people who drop out of education, employment or training, which would have important economic and social benefits far beyond the classroom.



The policy context

In December 2012, the Department for Education (DfE) closed its consultation on reform of key stage 4 qualifications. The proposed changes will lead to the development of a new suite of English Baccalaureate certificates (EBCs) to replace the GCSE syllabuses that are currently recognised in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) in order to “restore rigour and confidence in our examination system at age 16” (DfE, 2012b). This change is against a background of ongoing significant change to the vocational education sector informed by the Wolf report (Wolf, 2011) and the following consultation (NFER, 2012b); the end of the Connexions service and the provision of “independent and impartial” careers guidance by schools; and the raising of the participation age (RPA) to 18 by 2015.

NFER's response

The recent consultation asked about the potential of the proposals “to have a disproportionate impact, adverse or positive, on specific pupil groups”. Based on our programme of research into young people at risk of disengaging from education, NFER is concerned about the impact of the proposals on a significant group of young people – those at risk of becoming ‘not in education employment or training’ (NEET). In addition to the personal tragedy for the young person concerned, being NEET has a huge impact on the economy in terms of lost tax revenue and increased benefits load. Seventeen per cent of young people aged 16 to 24 are currently not in education, employment or training – a total of over 1 million, with a slightly higher proportion (19.6 per cent) of young people aged 19 to 24 being NEET (DfE, 2012a).

The background evidence

In 2009, NFER conducted research for the Department for Children, Schools and Families, which proposed a segmentation of the NEET population (Spielhofer et al, 2009), identifying three discrete subcategories of NEET young people aged 16 to 17:

- **Sustained NEETs** – young people characterised by their negative experience of school, higher levels of truancy and exclusion and lower academic attainment than other NEET young people, and the fact that they are most likely to remain NEET in the medium term.
- **Open-to-learning NEETs** – young people most likely to re-engage in education or training in the short term and with higher levels of attainment and better attitudes towards school than other NEET young people.
- **Undecided NEETs** – young people similar in some respects, such as their attainment levels, to those who are open-to-learning NEET, but dissatisfied with available opportunities and their ability to access what they want to do.

What the evidence tells us

Based on the findings of this research, NFER has conducted a number of further studies to investigate different ways of preventing young people at risk of temporary disengagement from education – the undecided and open-to-learning NEETs described above – from disengaging. The hypothesis behind this programme of work is that these two groups do not have multiple or complex issues, and with the right support and intervention during schooling need never have become NEET. In the original segmentation, three-fifths of the overall NEET group, so potentially over 600,000 of those young people who are currently NEET, were in the open-to learning or undecided categories.

These young people are likely to represent an easier problem to solve than the sustained NEET group, and if we could make a real difference – even if the numbers were halved (which would mean improved outcomes for potentially 300,000 young people) – it would leave more time and resource available to support the more intractable problems of the sustained NEET young people.

The evidence coming from this research about what might keep at-risk young people engaged is fairly conclusive, and is supported by discussions with organisations that are working directly with such young people. What we have found is that:

- Young people need to have a **wide range of experiences with employers**, during their secondary schooling, to give them an understanding of the world of work, to give them an idea of the kind of work they might want to do, and to give them a sense of purpose when continuing in education
- They also need to receive, from an early age, really **good, impartial careers education and information, advice and guidance** to help them work out the best route to get to where they want to be
- Many need **additional support** in areas relevant to them – such as resilience, problem-solving, or building self-confidence
- And they need the choice of the **right curriculum and qualifications for them, taught in the right way**, preferably available at their chosen place of study.

All of this needs to be provided at a time and in a format to suit the particular needs of the at-risk young people: in other words, it needs to be **personalised**. Schools and colleges are crucial in providing this support to the young people in their care, and as part of The NFER Research Programme we have provided resources that can help inform their work (www.nfer.ac.uk/research-programme).

Links to other policy reform

No-one could argue with the view that all young people should be challenged to be the best that they can be, and that their birth should not limit the options available to them or their belief that they can achieve. However, the proposed government reform of qualifications, as well as a number of other policy reforms that will impact on the same young people, do not seem to fit well with the needs of the young people at risk. A number of examples of this are given below.

- During 2012, a consultation was conducted into the provision of work experience in secondary schools. This proposed that the entitlement to work experience be removed from key stage 4 and moved back into the final two years of education, ie for young people aged 16+. NFER responded to this consultation (NFER, 2012c) arguing that this might not be in the best interest of at-risk young people. Young people start to disengage at different stages, but a majority disengage during the early years of their secondary school education. In order for them to get the benefits from employer engagement, such as work experience, this needs to be available as early as possible.
- There are currently significant changes to the way careers guidance is provided in schools and again this was the subject of a consultation during 2012. NFER's response (NFER, 2012a) highlights the importance of coherent careers education and guidance programmes that are

well-structured and appropriately timed to support all key decision or transition stages from year 7 to year 13. The government proposals are now being implemented and schools assumed their new responsibilities in September 2012 with little systemic support to help them provide the well-structured and timely guidance that is required, particularly for at-risk young people.

- During 2011, NFER responded to a consultation on vocational qualifications provision, (NFER, 2011) highlighting the risks of the changes for our target group of young people, suggesting for example that “where some students are not motivated by the academic curriculum and are becoming disaffected and disengaged, there may be a case for extending their involvement in vocational education beyond 20 per cent of their timetable”. Similarly, we argued, “if the proposed reform exhorts schools to put students on GCSEs rather than vocational qualifications which are larger than one GCSE, this reduced flexibility to meet individual students’ needs could lead to increased disengagement which runs contrary to the learning culture RPA is attempting to encourage”.

Our response to the consultation into key stage 4 qualifications, published in parallel to this paper (NFER, 2012b), highlights that the current changes could introduce real risks in terms of negative impacts on at-risk young people, and provides evidence that they should be offered a wide choice of subjects and courses to suit their interests and learning styles. It also suggests that good quality vocational, applied and practical qualifications should be a real choice for young people. All the NFER consultation responses are informed by large amounts of evidence – our own and others’.

The international context

Evidence from international surveys such as Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) highlights a large attainment gap in England in reading, science and mathematics. The most able students in England compare well with those in high-performing countries, but we also have a long tail of underachievement.

A number of high-performing countries, such as Finland, have much greater homogeneity, and some, such as the Netherlands, stand out by having few or no students performing at the lowest achievement levels, while others such as Poland have made huge gains in improving the performance of their lowest-attaining students. The research evidence that NFER is collecting about a group of our students who are really underachieving may provide the best indications about ways in which we could improve our performance in international comparisons.

Using evidence to mitigate the risks

On a hopeful note, the research evidence also provides a steer for how we can mitigate the potential damage of these current policy changes to at-risk young people. For example, our review of the evidence about the best curriculum and qualifications for keeping young people engaged found that rather than the qualification as such, there are features that may traditionally be associated with particular qualifications that help to keep these groups engaged. These include:

- Using flexible approaches to teaching so that all learners are engaged and stimulated

- The use of expert teachers who know their subject area and pedagogical approaches
- Teaching in smaller class groups
- Provision of timely extra support or catch up tuition
- Teaching delivered in an appealing way that interests the young person and draws out relevance to life.

There are also features of the broader learning environment that can be provided, irrespective of the particular qualifications being offered:

- Allowing learners to take ownership of their decision-making related to learning
- The opportunity to develop a relationship with a trusted adult (who may not be the teacher)
- Warm supportive learning environments in which teachers show an interest in their students as well as a well-managed and disciplined environment
- A flexible and personalised curriculum
- The provision of opportunities for young people to develop personal, social and employability skills.

Schools and colleges, and their leaders, are ideally placed, given the right resource and support, to make a huge difference.

Conclusions

Perhaps the most important thing to take from the evidence is that we know what works in terms of keeping at-risk young people engaged, and it is not something that is difficult to provide. If we get this right, it could have a really positive impact on the life trajectories of large numbers of young people; it may also improve our rankings in international surveys.

Current policy dialogue is incredibly positive in terms of giving all young people, whatever their background, the chance to succeed. There is a risk to some groups, however, in that our ways of keeping these young people – who are less resilient, who lack a sense of purpose, who want to have a successful future but are uncertain about the options that are available to them – engaged and positive contributors to society may be damaged by some of the current changes. In particular, the focus on rigour might be marginalising important and vulnerable groups for whom we have a good understanding about ways of keeping them engaged.

Young people have a huge range of different needs, different learning styles, different strengths and weaknesses, and not all young people will respond well to increased rigour and challenge. We need to find ways of making the current developments work for them and providing the safety net that they may need to prevent any negative impact.

Ultimately, everyone working in education shares a desire to reduce the number of young people who drop out of education, employment or training, even if only temporarily, and this will have important economic and social benefits far beyond the classroom.

If we do not listen to the research evidence and get this right now, the opposite may be the outcome.

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NFER

NFER is a charity with a reputation worldwide for providing independent and robust evidence for excellence in education and children's services. Our aim is to improve education and learning, and hence the lives of learners, by researching what is happening now. Our authoritative insights inform policy and practice offering a unique perspective on today's educational challenges.

We work with an extensive network of organisations, all genuinely interested in making a difference to education and learners. Any surplus generated is reinvested in research projects to continue our work to improve the life chances of all learners from early years through to higher education.

Schools are key partners in much of our research and over 50 per cent of UK schools take part in NFER projects in any year. We continually work to develop ways to help teachers and school leaders improve pupil performance, teaching and assessment using our evidence from research to provide accessible information and an increasing range of innovative products and services to assist schools gather and analyse data and demonstrate improvement.



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