



**Raising Expectations: staying in education and
training post-16**

Department for Education and Skills

British Youth Council response

The British Youth Council (BYC) is the national youth council of the United Kingdom. We represent a unique coalition of young people who've joined together through national, regional and/or local youth organisations. Our membership and network numbers over 170 organisations and 400 youth councils. BYC promotes the active citizenship of young people and works to ensure that they are more involved in decisions about their lives.

We aim to do four things:

- Provide a voice for young people;
- Promote equality for young people;
- Help young people be more involved in decisions that affect their lives;
- Advance young people's participation in society and civil life.

We bring young people together to agree on issues of common concern and encourage them to bring about change through taking collective action.

BYC is run by young people for young people. Young people shape our work at all levels through participation in our projects, and regular consultations on policy. Young people also control our governance as a member of BYC's board of 13 annually elected trustees all between the ages of 18 and 24.

BYC encourages young people to become engaged and active through a number of mechanisms:

Publications: BYC produces a range of publications to help youth organisations realise their plans for development.

Supporting youth councils: BYC also actively promotes local youth councils as a model for young people to come together to discuss issues that are important to them and to use their collective resources to lobby effectively for local action.

Policy and Parliament: BYC facilitates young people's involvement in national governance through regular consultations that feed into the Westminster policy making process.

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Key Points:

- **BYC opposes the introduction of compulsory participation to age 18.**
- **Young People have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives – remaining in education or training until 18 might not be right for everyone.**
- **The government should focus its efforts on reforming pre-16 education to ensure that all young people have obtained Level 2 Qualifications by the age of 16.**
- **Legislation should concentrate on broadening the focus of the curriculum to better prepare young people for the ‘real world’; delivering a comprehensive and universal PSHE curriculum and ensuring young people are given personalised support regarding their choices post-16.**
- **Legal enforcement is highly inappropriate and will only have the effect of criminalising those that the new system is intended to help.**

Chapter 2: The benefits of requiring participation

1. Do you agree that there is a case for introducing compulsory participation to age 18?

The British Youth Council (BYC) strongly opposes the introduction of compulsory participation to age 18. This would remove an element of choice from young people about how to live their lives and staying in education or training until 18 might not be right for everyone.

Rather than reforming the post -16 education system, we would thoroughly recommend that the government conduct a comprehensive review of the current pre-16 system. This would be in consultation with young people, to ensure that the areas in which they feel the current system could be improved are taken into account, and that their views be central to informing the improvement of the process.

Paragraph 2.4 states that “achieving at least a level 2 qualification is particularly important as this is considered to be the minimum threshold for employability. By participating for longer, young people are much more likely to achieve a level 2 qualification and consequently earn more in the future.”

However, by ensuring that the pre-16 education system is at its optimum, not only will a larger proportion of young people achieve level 2 qualifications by age 16, thus negating

the perceived need to keep young people in education until 18 to achieve this level of qualification as a baseline; but more young people will be inclined to remain in the system voluntarily beyond age 16.

Paragraph 2.4 further states that “people with five or more good GCSEs earn on average around £100,000 more over their lifetime than those who leave learning with qualifications below level 2.” However, although the new legislation would force an individual young person to remain in education for an extra two years and thus have two years longer to work towards level 2 qualifications, this does not guarantee that he or she will obtain the equivalent of “five or more good GCSEs”. A lesser achievement would mean the young person would remain at considerable disadvantage compared to his or her more academic peers, and moreover this is not an effective use of two years of time, which could have been better spent in meaningful employment. Studies consistently show that the best predictor of future employment or ‘employability’ is being employed¹.

BYC consulted with young people to gain their views on the proposed legislative change and 46% of those surveyed did not agree with raising the participation age to 18. This compares to 39% who agreed with the proposals and 15% who were unsure. One survey respondent commented:

“I think it’s a ridiculous notion to force someone to stay in education until the age of 18 with the offer of financial help when university top up fees under the Labour government have only risen.”

BYC’s results echo the findings of a study by the Learning and Skills Network (LSN)² earlier this year, which found that only 50.5% of teenagers support the change. LSN also found that the majority of parents (59.7%) support the view that the state should guide 16 year olds because they are not ready to make a choice of their own, whereas a clear majority of teenagers (71.3%) are in favour of retaining their right to choose.

BYC believes and indeed, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 12 stipulates that young people have a right to have their opinions taken into account on matters that concern them. 50% support amongst young people is arguably insufficient for the proposal to be carried and does little to provoke confidence as regards the likelihood of success.

Whilst BYC applauds the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) for carrying out its own consultation with young people, we believe this has happened too late and that young people should have been consulted during the initial planning phase. On reading the Green Paper, young people’s voices are clearly missing from the proposals.

¹ Alison Wolf, Kings College London, in a presentation to the Learning and Skills Network, Spring Lecture 1st May 2007

² Villeneuve-Smith et al, 2007 *Raising the leaving learning age: are the public convinced?* Learning and Skills Network

BYC would argue that for educational reforms to be successful, they should be planned in thorough consultation with young people at all stages, to maximise the chances of buy in. The message is clear from two separate pieces of research that only half of young people are in favour of compulsory participation to 18. Young people will not be motivated by plans that they do not agree with and therefore the likelihood of them participating voluntarily is greatly reduced.

Chapter 3: A new requirement to participate

2. Do you agree that participation should include participation in school, college, work-based learning and accredited training provided by an employer?

BYC is in favour of a wide range of possible learning options being available to young people at the pre-16 stage. However we strongly believe the focus of education should be on the type of provision (such as apprenticeships, training, formal schooling) rather than the age at which education is undertaken.

Young people believe the system should be as flexible as possible so as to allow students to flourish in their strong subjects, and provide greater support for areas which students find harder. Young people need to be offered more information, advice and guidance regarding the decisions they make in terms of subject choices and the type of qualifications pursued, increasing their understanding of the implications of their choices for the future.

BYC recognises that encouraging young people to take A-Levels and by inference applying to university, is not necessarily the best option for all young people. Young people also need to be made aware of the potential financial implications of going on to higher education after 18 – perhaps in some cases it will be more worthwhile going straight into a working environment than pursuing a degree course. New research from Universities UK³, which examines the economic benefits of a degree, demonstrates that the value added in terms of additional gross lifetime earnings for having an arts degree is less than £35,000. The introduction of higher tuition fees and the abolition of the grant system, means students in higher education will be out of pocket by around £33,000 for tuition and living costs after pursuing a three year degree course⁴. So whilst, from a macro point of view, it may be desirable to maximise the number of individuals with a degree⁵, from an individual young person's point of view it might not be worth undertaking an arts degree, for example. This is exactly the type of information young people need to be provided with to supplement their education programme and enable them to weigh up all the criteria and reach a decision about their future based on fact. Moreover, since education is supposed to be about providing learning and skills for

³ *Research Report: The economic benefits of a degree* (Universities UK, 2007).

⁴ NatWest Student Money Survey, 2006.

⁵ *Raising Expectations*, paragraph 2.6

individuals, there is an element of self-refutation in any proposal which uses macro examples as its basis.

In addition, the pre-16 education system needs to become more holistic in approach; the focus on meeting targets and achieving exam results at the moment overshadows the system, branding young people who do not 'achieve' as failures, disengaging and alienating them. BYC advocates the need to generate a situation where even if young people choose to leave education at 16 they already have instilled knowledge to help them through life, to give them self-confidence and independence, allowing them to make informed decisions which best suit them.

In a separate survey, we asked young people what would most improve the pre-16 education system and the most popular answers were 'less focus on exams' (32%) and 'more relevant and structured PSHE' (29%).

Indeed, BYC sees a move towards a compulsory, more thoroughly integrated, PSHE and citizenship curriculum for Key Stages 1-4, as being crucial to achieving young people's personal development and equipping them with key life skills. This is especially vital if Britain is to make any significant headway in tackling teenage pregnancy, STI rates, drugs and alcohol problems and civic participation. Awareness and personal responsibility need to be instilled from an early age.

The curriculum must be standardised and teaching must be equally implemented, with no 'opt-outs' allowed. This is especially significant in the area of sex and relationship education, where the provision afforded in the science curriculum does not adequately cover the complex social and emotional dimensions of this area of life. It is morally negligent to deny young people education in this area, the government needs to take a firm stance and not allow parents' prejudices to jeopardise their children's wellbeing.

Young people also need to be made more aware of their rights as an employee, of how the taxation system works, of where they can go to gain help and advice, and receive far more comprehensive careers guidance, taking into account our ever changing employment market where a job for life is an exception rather than a rule.

The education programme needs to be supported by other facilitating and confidence instilling moves outside of school: having a fair and equal national minimum wage for everyone over the age of 16 and giving everyone over the age of 16 the right to express themselves in a constructive and democratic way, by giving them the right to vote.

6. Do you agree that a young person who is employed could participate part time?

BYC believes it should be a matter of individual choice as to whether a young person in employment wishes to participate part time, it should not be compulsory.

DfES⁶ calculations estimate 13% of 16 and 17 year olds are in work but not in education and training. However it would arguably be mistaken to assume that none of them are learning anything 'on the job'.

In our survey we asked young people whether they agreed or disagreed that 16 and 17 year olds who were working full time would learn enough 'on the job' and so would not need to participate in further education or training. Our respondents were somewhat divided on this with just under 40% agreeing that enough would be learnt on the job and just over 40% disagreeing. 20% were unsure. BYC would suggest that this is a grey area where more research is required.

BYC is also concerned that compulsory participation will add an additional facet in that employers of 16 and 17 year olds on training and apprenticeship schemes will be exempted from minimum wage regulations as is currently the case. If the government chooses to retain this exemption, there is a danger that 16 and 17 year olds forced into apprenticeships by the new legislation will be plunged into real financial hardship and this will seriously impact on their willingness to participate voluntarily.

Many 16 and 17 year olds who currently choose to leave school and enter employment may have been called upon to support a low income family, or have left home for personal reasons. For these young people, very low wages can have a devastating psychological and physical impact. Lack of a decent wage brings feelings of frustration and powerlessness. Low pay can lead to problems around health, educational failure and social exclusion.

As it stands, nearly half of the current 250,000 apprentices fail to complete their training scheme. The main reasons suggested by the Learning and Skills Development Agency are:

- scepticism of among employers about the relevance of off the job training
- failure on the part of employers and providers to integrate on-and off the job training effectively
- not all employers see training completion as important
- only 20% of employers using pay incentives after completion to encourage learner progression⁷

A similar report by the DfES also cited low pay for earners which led many to search out better paid jobs which did not necessarily also offering training.⁸ If the government does not extend minimum wage regulations to cover apprenticeships to accompany the new legislation, there is a real risk that tens of thousands of young people will waste time in poorly paid, unsustainable apprenticeship programmes that they will be inclined to abandon in favour of better paid, dead end jobs despite the legislation.

⁶ DfES calculations in the October 2006 presentation 'Reducing the proportion of 16-18 year olds NEET'

⁷ *Making Work based learning work: Improving Employer engagement in the delivery of apprenticeships.* LSDA, 2005.

⁸ *Modern Apprenticeships: Exploring the reasons for non-completion.* DFES, 2000.

Furthermore paragraphs 4.25 and 4.26 state that “Apprenticeships should be the preferred route for young people in employment” and “Outside this, accredited training for those in employment would be most likely to be towards an NVQ 2 or 3 qualification.” However, Dearden et al (2007) found that wage returns to NVQ level 2 qualifications compared to individuals with no qualifications are insignificant and so there would seem to be no worth in forcing a young person to complete an NVQ level 2.

Chapter 4: A suitable route for every young person

9. Do you agree that, taken together, the routes outlined in this chapter mean that there will be an appropriate and engaging option for all 16 and 17 year olds by 2013?

Whilst BYC disagrees with the introduction of compulsory participation post-16, we recognise that the proposals are endeavouring to provide appropriate and engaging options for all, and 65% of those surveyed agreed there would be something for everyone. As mentioned before however, we strongly believe the focus of education should be on the type of provision (such as apprenticeships, training, formal schooling) rather than the age at which education is undertaken.

Moreover, we would highlight concerns over the structure and implementation of the proposed 14-19 Diploma programme as outlined in the Education and Skills Committee report⁹ and echoed by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, which raised concerns regarding the lack of time available for training staff who will deliver the new programme¹⁰.

BYC would reiterate that in order to successfully engage young people and inspire them to participate voluntarily post-16, the provision has to be right in the first place and we believe the route to this is by reforming the pre-16 system in consultation with young people.

10. Should there be requirements for young people who are training to do more than just an accredited occupational qualification? (for example, should they be expected to do functional English or maths and/or wider technical education?)

By ensuring that the pre-16 education system is at its optimum, a larger proportion of young people will achieve level 2 qualifications by age 16, which should include English and Maths. BYC would recommend focusing efforts on ensuring English and Maths provision is right at the earlier educational stages and concentrating resources on, for

⁹ House of Commons Education and Skills Committee *14-19Diplomas*, Fifth report of session 2006-07

¹⁰ Association of Teachers and Lecturers press release 17th May 2007

example coaching 11 year olds, rather than trying to make up for inadequate pre-16 provision at the post-16 stage, which is arguably more of a drain on resources.

Chapter 5: Enabling all young people to participate

11. Do you agree financial support should still be provided to young people from low income households, if participation is compulsory?

Financial support is crucial to some young people from low income households and the support should be available no matter whether participation is compulsory or not.

Furthermore, there needs to be differentiation between financial support and financial incentives. Support is crucial, especially for young people from low income families. Almost three quarters of those surveyed by BYC agreed that financial support is crucial for some young people and should be a right rather than something that is offered as a reward for staying in education. Offering financial incentives to stay in the system is a flawed approach, education should be valued with achievement as the goal and motivator, an ethos where financial reward is required to generate effort is undermining.

Giving evidence to the Commons Education and Skills Committee on 18th April 2007, the Rt Hon Alan Johnson MP said that Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) would not be available as an incentive post 2015 but that money would be targeted at poorer students. BYC would reaffirm the need for financial support for young people from low income families and would also recommend that the EMA system, or its replacement, should be extended to cover the higher education system. For example, one survey respondent said:

“Normally the Educational Maintenance Allowance is very low – certainly not enough to allow a young person to support themselves, which may lead to family pressure to leave education and get a job in low income families.... What happens for those wanting to continue in further education after 18?”

12. What would be the right financial support arrangements for young people required to participate to age 18?

As part of our survey we asked respondents to indicate what kinds of financial support would be most beneficial to help young people remain in education. There was overwhelming support for free transport, with over 90% citing this as important. BYC recently successfully campaigned to keep free bus and tram travel for under-18s in full time education in London and we would welcome the expansion of this scheme to the rest of the country.

Almost 70% of those surveyed thought that money for books would help and 50% said money for kit or equipment would also help.

Other comments included: *“Possibly help with living expenses if they have left home. Also, free childcare could help young parents.”*

13. Should we consider other incentives, such as withholding driving licences from 17 year olds who are not participating in education or training?

BYC is strongly opposed to penalising young people who do not participate in education or training. We would reaffirm our call to reform pre-16 education in consultation with young people. If the system is right in the first place, young people will participate voluntarily and there will be no need for coercion.

Comments from survey respondents include: *“Taking away driving licences is the most ridiculous idea I have ever heard – why wouldn’t a driving licence be considered a valid qualification to help young people into employment?”*

Chapter 7: Making sure young people participate

17. Do you agree that there should be a system of enforcement attached to any new requirement to participate, used only as a last resort?

BYC vehemently opposes enforcement and it should not be resorted to under any circumstances. If the education system is succeeding in generating self-confidence and social awareness and positively engaging young people, then a greater number will self elect to stay on in education after 16 as they will see the advantages of doing so for themselves. To inflict legal coercion is the wrong approach, young people will feel pressurised and patronised and therefore they are more likely to reject the system.

The LSN¹¹ research study found that 82.6% of parents believe teenagers with drug and alcohol problems will not comply and 83.2% believe that young people who are involved in offending behaviour will not comply. The consensus therefore seems to be that the young people least likely to participate voluntarily will be those with the most complex social problems.

The summary of Chapter 2 states: “We want to stop young people dropping out of education or training before 18, because of the benefits that higher attainment and longer participation bring to the individual young person, to the economy and to society.” If legal penalties are enforced on those who do not attend, thus criminalising their behaviour, this will have the effect of further stigmatising and alienating, rather than

¹¹ Villeneuve-Smith et al, 2007 *Raising the leaving learning age: are the public convinced?* Learning and Skills Network

helping, those who are already being failed by the system. Young people with complex social problems need support, not a criminal record.

Only 15.4% of parents surveyed by LSN support the idea of criminal sanctions and 60% of our survey respondents disagree with enforcement. Some comments include:

“I think that the reasons why young people are not engaging need to be addressed, rather than penalising young people for not attending.”

“Young people should be given several chances. It is important to look into why a young person might not be attending school...”

18. Is it right that the primary responsibility for attending at age 16 and 17 should rest with young people themselves?

80% of respondents to our survey said that young people themselves should be responsible for their own actions. However, as mentioned earlier young people need to have the correct information before them. They should have guidance around the implications of subject choice on future career options, the costs associated with pursuing different courses of study and a robust PSHE curriculum. Education also needs to be supplemented by other facilitating and confidence instilling moves outside of school, i.e. a fair and equal national minimum wage for everyone over the age of 16 and enfranchisement for 16 and 17 year olds.

22. Further comments

In addition to its earlier comments, BYC is also disappointed to note that there has been no recognition of the role of the non-formal and voluntary sector in facilitating young people's education. Young people gain essential personal development and life skills through volunteering and we would have thought recognition of this would be particularly pertinent as a result of the Russell Commission findings and the establishment of the volunteering charity, v.